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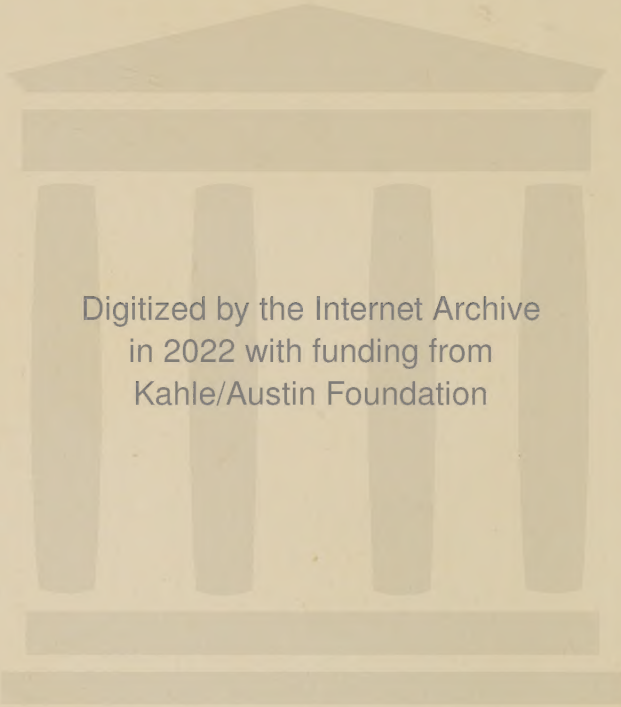
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# Three and One Over

By

May Wynne

*Author of "Roseleen at School,"  
"The Girls of Clanways Farm,"  
etc.*



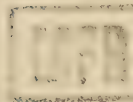
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# Three and One Over

## CHAPTER I

### THE ARRIVAL

“THE best part of coming to Aunt Nance’s is that we shall have two weeks longer holidays,” said Donald slowly.

Stella chuckled, and scrambled on to the seat of the railway compartment to pull down the bundle of rugs and mackintoshes. She had been *very* quietly wiping away a tear in the darkness of the tunnel, and was anxious that the boys should not notice the traces on her rosy cheeks. Leslie had such very sharp eyes for seeing things!

“I—I liked Aunt Nance when she came to our house,” she replied. “The only thing I’m so afraid of is that she won’t believe I always do just the same things as you do. Mother said she would explain, but . . . Aunt Nance might not understand.”

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“We’re nearly there,” cried Leslie; “the train is slowing down. Being an engine-driver must be fine! I wish we could go and see how he puts on the brakes. Sta . . . ation! Anford. I say, this place looks jolly—and there are *woods*! That’s just like you, Stella; head over heels!”

Stella picked herself up from under the bundle of rugs. She was the merriest of girls, tall for her eleven years, and possessed of a mop of curls and clear brown eyes. You would not need to look twice at Stella to know that she was a romp, any more than you would have hesitated in saying Leslie was a pickle! He was a year older than Stella, and not a bit like her; his face was pale and rather thin, his mouth wide and his cheeks freckled, but his grey eyes just danced with fun and a hint of mischief. Leslie was a regular boy, a regular tease, and a *most* regular Paul Pry.

One day he meant to be an inventor—unless he were an explorer. He was always trying to practise a little of each occupation.

Donald was the eldest, and his thirteenth birthday had been kept on the 20th of February, one month ago. He had brown eyes

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like Stella, and a pale face like Leslie, but he was not a bit like either brother or sister in character. Donald was not a great talker, and he had a very slow way of doing things. Dad called him "Old Mr. Snail," or sometimes "Slow Coach Sam"; but mother would reply "Slow and sure," and if she had a message to send, or a job to be done, she always felt safest if Donald undertook it.

Donald was in charge to-day, and he had been very serious and a little bit tiresome about it, too—refusing to allow Leslie to let down the window, and forbidding Stella to lean against the door.

It was only an hour and a half's railway journey from London to Anford, in Kent, and the three young Garrocks had thoroughly enjoyed looking out of the windows as the train carried them from bustling, dingy London into the lovely green country which, to town-dwellers, is always a land of delight.

And it was spring-time—the loveliest season of the year. Leslie had decided that he meant to collect bird's eggs, and Stella had bought an album in which to dry and press flowers, while Donald was possessed of a gleaming

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trowel and a really sensible basket, in which to pack the ferns and plants they were sure to find for mother's rockery.

Aunt Nance, big and bony, and a wee bit quaint with her country clothes and mushroom hat, was on the platform to receive them, and Donald went off with her to collect the luggage, while the younger children obediently walked out to where a tub-cart and fat pony had been left in charge of a small boy.

"What a jolly tail the pony has!" said Leslie. "And it's as broad as it's long—the pony, I mean, not the tail! I say, Stella, can't we walk on to Clinton Lodge? We shall be like sardines packed in that cart. And we can explore."

Stella was delighted.

"Will you tell Miss Garrock?" she asked the small boy. "Say we are sure to find our way. We know what the Lodge looks like, too. Leslie, what *are* you doing?"

For Leslie had left the station building and was prowling about a deep ditch by the wayside. He was much too interested in what he had found in the water to hear Stella, who swooped down on him prepared to lecture.



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But she was too late. Leslie, regardless of boots or stockings, had plunged into the ditch, grabbing at something which kicked and wriggled desperately in its efforts to escape.

“A frog,” he cried, “the very yellowest frog I’ve ever seen! A beauty! Aunt Nance *will* like him—if she has a pond.”

But Stella, though the youngest of the three, was always a little mother” to Leslie, the venturesome.

“Mud!” she cried in dismay; “look at your boots, Les, and—here comes Aunt Nance in the cart.”

Leslie looked askance at his boots. Thick mud covered them completely. It was only with an effort that he was able to “unglue” himself from that sticky ditch and regain the path.

Unnoticed by Stella he had slipped the yellow frog into his pocket, and just then Aunt Nance pulled up Roley-Poley, the pony.

“My fault!” she exclaimed, in that quick, jerky way which the children felt would take a long time to get used to. “I ought to have remembered that all boys are bags of mischief, eh? Get in, Stella, and you too, you young Turk! But have the grace to keep your feet

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to yourself. That's right! Hang them out to air. Why in the world did I say I would be plagued with three such pickles!"

The children laughed. They knew at once that Aunt Nance was not really grumbling, she had such a twinkle in her kind eyes.

"We love coming," said Stella. "It's real country, isn't it? Clapham is just like London, you see, and there aren't any woods or even a river. We *shall* have fun!"

"Now listen to me, bairns," said Aunt Nance, as she drove Roley-Poley up a gravel drive and stopped before a low, ivy-clad house. "You're here for five weeks, and there's no reason why they should not be happy ones. But you must remember three things: *not* to go near the river without a grown-up; *not* to be late for meals; and *not* to tease Bun and Bounce, the terriers, or Julius Cæsar, the donkey. Eh?"

"Of course we'll remember!" chorused the children, their faces bright with smiles. Aunt Nance's rules did not seem at all hard ones. In fact, they were as eager as could be to show that boys and girls are not always bags of mischief. Leslie sat down on the door-step to

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take off his muddy boots, and if Aunt Nance had not seized him by the scruff of his neck would have pattered off barefoot to find the "boot-hole." Donald shouldered the big glad-stone-bag which had been squeezed into the cart, and Stella rang the bell before she came racing back to ask if she could lead Roley-Poley to his stable.

"Many hands make light work," said Aunt Nance briskly, "but, all the same, Donald, you'll be straining your back over that bag—and here's Roger to take Roley-Poley. So the easiest job for you three children is to follow me quietly upstairs, and take your hats and coats off before tea."

Donald and Stella looked rather blank. They had been hoping to be allowed to rush off directly tea was over, to explore the rambling garden and woods, but they did not say anything. And what a lovely tea Aunt Nance had ready for them in the cosiest of dining-rooms!

Leslie was so busy looking up at the ceiling, with its black beams, that he almost forgot the way to his mouth, and Stella clasped her hands in anxiety as she saw strawberry jam trickling down his chin.

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“Mind the cloth, Les,” she whispered, and Leslie, very red in the face, dived for his handkerchief. Oh dear! He had forgotten the yellowest of frogs, which had not been enjoying its dark prison and which gave one desperate leap out from that handkerchief on to the white table-cloth.

Stella screamed, Donald gasped, Aunt Nance spilled some of the tea on Bun the terrier’s nose as she too hastily set down the pot, while the poor frog, taking another leap, landed itself right on a plate.

By this time Donald’s slow wits had grasped the fact that the frog was very much alive, and also very frightened.

“Poor old thing!” he said. “Here, I’ve got him. Is there a pond I can put him into, Aunt Nance?”

Leslie beamed.

“That’s what I caught him for,” he said cheerily. “Isn’t he a beauty? I knew Aunt Nance would be pleased.”

And he said it so triumphantly that Aunt Nance had not the heart to scold him, though she made it quite plain that she not only disapproved of frogs at the tea-table, but that it



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was really cruel to put anything alive into one's pocket !

After the frog incident Aunt Nance was quite ready to say " Yes " when Stella asked if they might go out till half-past six.

" Have you anything for the post, aunt ? " asked Donald. " I'm going to send mother a post card to say we've arrived safely, *and* all the luggage. I believe she was afraid we might lose Leslie, because he loves poking about so. You see, it is the first time we have travelled anywhere alone."

" Yes," said Aunt Nance, who had already made up her mind that slow Donald, with his " father of the family " manner, would be her favourite. " I shall have a letter ready in five minutes, and I am sure I can trust you to take it. You're just your father's boy altogether."

Leslie had made firm friends with Bun and Bounce before that five minutes was up. He must have used some kind of magic with animals, for he always won their hearts at once. Bun and Bounce were Yorkshire terriers, with very bright eyes and shaggy coats. Perhaps they recognized Leslie as a kindred spirit, for

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they certainly looked as if they understood the word *mischief* !

“What a pity we have to go to the post office !” said Stella regretfully as they trudged off. “Agnes, the housemaid, says the woods are full of primroses, and we could have picked a bunch each and sent them to mother. Listen, Leslie, there’s the cuckoo ! *Cuckoo ! Cuckoo ! . . .* Isn’t this real country ?”

“I went to tell cook she was a duck to make us that shortbread,” said Leslie. “She’s a nice cook, *ever* so fat and short, like Roley-Poley. I think Aunt Nance must give everyone too much to eat. I like that. It’s far nicer to eat too much than too little.”

No one replied to this, for Donald and Stella were too busy looking about them. Anford village was so pretty, and so unlike most other villages ; there were trees in the cottage gardens which looked too big to be there, and such a jolly village pump. Leslie went off to see how the pump worked, while Donald and Stella posted their correspondence, and went inside the office to buy picture post cards.

The girl in the post office was very nice, and told them that Anford woods belonged to Sir

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Leonard Trefford, who lived at Trefford Court on the other side of the village. He had a nephew just about Donald's age, living with him, she said, and Sir Leonard was a real nice gentleman, who never minded children going into the woods to pick primroses.

Stella would have asked the nephew's name had not the sudden howl of a dog startled them. The post-office clerk looked out of the window.

"There is Master Hugh," said she; "we all call him that. Sir Leonard, his uncle, owns most of the village. He's talking to a boy who's been ducking his dog under the pump. That *would* anger Master Hugh—he thinks the world of Ringo!"

"It's Leslie!" said Donald briefly, and he ran out of the shop. Stella followed. She was sure Leslie had never meant to duck anyone's dog, though certainly the Airedale terrier, which a boy of about Donald's age stood hugging in his arms, was dripping wet.

Leslie was looking somewhat red in the face, and Donald and Stella heard him explaining matters as they came up.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Leslie. "I couldn't see your dog. He must have been

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coming to find out what I was doing, and I was only thinking of how to pump the water. The arm is so heavy, I—er—had to *sit* on it before I could get it down, and then the water came with a rush—and *I* went down. *I am* sorry.”

The vexed flush died out of the other boy's cheeks, and he smiled round at the three children.

“You must have come down very hard if you fell off the pump handle,” he replied. “I know it's frightfully stiff. Never mind about Ringo. He was paid out for being curious.”

“So was I,” added Leslie mournfully, as he rubbed a sore elbow, but the other boy was looking at Stella.

“You must be Miss Garrock's nephews and niece,” he exclaimed. “I heard you were coming, and there are no other boys and girls round about Anford—not your sort, I mean. I do hope we'll be friends.”

He pulled off his cap, after letting Ringo go, and held out rather a wet hand to Stella, who shook it vigorously.

“We've just heard who you are,” she replied brightly. “And may we really go in your uncle's woods? The primroses are lovely.”

Hugh Trefford smiled.

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"Of course you can go and pick primroses," he replied, "but it's rather dull. There are lots of other things we can do, which I never could do alone. Will you come up to the Court? Then we can make plans. Uncle Len said I might ask you."

But Donald shook his head.

"We have to be back by half-past six," he replied, "but we'd like to come to-morrow. Shall we meet you here at ten o'clock?"

That seemed the best arrangement, though Hugh showed his disappointment at not being able to persuade them to come this evening. It would have been so easy to send a message to Miss Garrock! Evidently Hugh was used to having his own way, and did not approve of being thwarted; but Donald had such a decided manner of speaking that the other boy guessed it was no use to argue—only he had half a mind, for a moment, to say he would be otherwise engaged to-morrow.

But he didn't do that, after all.

When you have never had any real, jolly playfellows to make games and sport possible, it does not do to miss opportunities.

"I wonder," said Leslie, as the three went

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home together, "what Hugh Trefford does with himself all day—and whether there are dungeons at the Court. I do hope there are! I should love to be shut up in a dungeon just for five minutes to see what it feels like."

Stella chuckled.

"You'd be squealing to come out before two minutes were over," she replied. "Now—a race to the gate. Don't be beaten by a *girl*, boys!"

That was Stella's special tease, for, though she was two years younger than Donald, she had often beaten him at racing. There was never—so those boys pantingly admitted—such a girl runner as Stella; but this evening Leslie beat her by three yards, and perched himself on the gate, crowing like a cock. Old Robbie, the gardener, shook his head as he went home down the lane.

"It's the wust time in the whole year to hev children let loose in the garden," he groaned. "But I ain't standing no nonsense from them boys, that I ain't!"

Old Robbie had no doubt whatever as to the material boys were made of. Mischief—right through!



## CHAPTER II

### DONALD MAKES A FRIEND

**D**ONALD the snail was not Donald the sluggard. He loved getting up early. Perhaps that was because he spent the long hours of day-time so slowly. Leslie was snoring blissfully when his elder brother tiptoed from the room on the morning after their arrival at Clinton Lodge.

Donald wanted to have what he called a "good look round." It is so much easier to get to know the lie of the land when one is alone, and Donald always preferred to do one thing at a time. That was not Stella's way—or Leslie's. They bustled from one game or one job to another, too eager to see and do everything at once to give time to the doing of anything properly.

Donald knew where the village was, but he wanted to climb the hill and walk across the common to where an old black mill stretched

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out its broken arms. The ruin of an old mill is always interesting, as most ruins are.

There were woods fringing the common—straggling woods, with broken fences and muddy ditches—but there were violets and primroses in the bank, and very excited Donald was to discover there the jolliest little Mrs. Robin seated on two eggs in a small moss nest. Donald would not have robbed that little bird for anything. Mrs. Robin seemed to know this, and looked at him quite boldly as he climbed the bank and slid down on the other side.

You won't be able quite to understand all the magic Donald found in that wood unless you, too, live in a land of houses and pavements. All the children loved their home, of course, because it *was* home; but how often they wished they could pack it up and carry it away to the country!

Donald listened to the birds singing over their work of nest-building, and watched the first sunbeams peeping through baby green leaves, and told himself that when he was a man he would be a gamekeeper and live always in a wood like this. Then a rabbit scuttled across his path, and he tried to catch it.

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Do rabbits laugh? If so, this one must have chuckled at the blundering of the clumsy mortal who got himself all tangled up in brambles, but never came within ten yards of catching *him*!

Brambles are most affectionate in their clinging, and Donald did not escape from their clutches without taking away several scratches as souvenirs of the encounter. But those were the fortunes of war, and he did not think of going back. Stella and Leslie, too, would love to explore this wood, and if he—Donald—walked right through it, he would know what was on the other side.

But other adventures were waiting for this early bird, and Donald had barely picked himself up from a fall from a tree which he had commenced to climb in chase of a squirrel, than he heard the long, piteous whine of some animal in pain.

That was quite enough for Donald. The creature must be found and helped, even if he were late for breakfast. Ah! what was that lying crouched amongst dead leaves and twigs, evidently caught in a trap? It wasn't a rabbit and it wasn't a dog. Why, what a thick tail

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it had, too! It must be a fox. Donald's knowledge of foxes had been gleaned from books; he did not remember ever having seen a live one before, and his excitement was great. A fox! One of those cunning animals which rob farmyards, and steal what does not belong to them. Of course, it deserved to be—er—caught in a trap; but all the same the pitiful whining of the poor creature, and the sight of a bloodstained leg, brought a quick throb of pity to the young judge's heart. Traps were cruel and mean, anyhow, and if a fox stole it was, after all, only its nature to do so.

“I won't hurt you, silly!” said the boy gruffly, as he stooped down, fumbling at the trap with unaccustomed fingers. The fox was wonderfully tame, and its instinct told it that this was a friend. Donald's task was not easy, and he did not quite understand how to force back those cruel teeth, with the result that he tore his own hand badly. But—the fox was free. Poor thing! it looked so pleased, and so pathetic, too, limping round and apparently in no haste to run off. It was certainly more like a tame animal than a wild one.

Donald was trying to tie a none too clean

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handkerchief round his bleeding hand, when he heard a gruff voice say: "Hello! What's up?"

Of course, it would be a keeper, and if so he would want to kill that poor little fox. Donald put his hand protectingly about the animal.

"It's hurt," he pleaded. "You can't kill it. That trap's cruel. I——"

He looked up as he spoke and discovered that his visitor was not a keeper at all, but a very shaggy, grubby, queer-looking man, who wore a fur cap and a thick, green coat with bulging pockets. Donald had no time to ask who he was, for the man had picked up the fox and was fondling it tenderly.

"Poor old Sammy!" he said; "poor old chap! I'll have to doctor that paw. One up against them as set that trap! And——" He paused and looked at Donald, who had turned rather pale and did not seem able to stop that bleeding.

"So you had pity on my Sammy, lad," he added. "I won't forget that—not likely! since it's the first bit of kindness anyone's done Foxey Bob for years. If you ain't too proud to come

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along to my hut, I'll tie up that cut, and—and thank you more hearty."

"I don't want thanks," said Donald faintly. "I felt sorry for the poor brute, that's all. Is it tame? I've never heard of a tame fox."

The man laughed.

"Maybe you've never heard of a wild man, eh?" he asked. "Why, there's not a kid in the village ain't afraid of me. But you helped Sammy—and you're a stranger, so come along with me."

Donald felt too queer to think of making excuses. He hated to see his own blood smothering the handkerchief, and wondered how much one has to lose before bleeding to death, Foxey Bob took him across a deep ditch, and out of the wood on to a piece of ugly waste land—the sort of land Leslie would have liked to explore!

There was a wooden shanty built between two hillocks, and this must have been the strange man's home, for he took Donald in and tied up his hurt hand with a piece of clean linen rag. He bandaged it very cleverly, too and Donald felt much better when the blood was hidden from sight. Bob wanted him to



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drink some horribly-smelling stuff out of a bottle, but when his visitor refused, he made him a cup of tea instead.

“Do you live here alone?” asked Donald.  
“You must be awfully dull.”

The inside of the hut quite amazed him, it was so dirty and stuffy and untidy. For all that, it appeared most interesting, and Donald would have liked to have had a good look round, but there was no time to spare now. For it must be near breakfast-time, and punctuality was one of Aunt Nance’s strictest rules. He told Bob who he was staying with, and the queer man nodded.

“The old maid who lives at the Lodge. I know!” he said. “I did odd jobs for her ther when I was a boy. I’ve no grouch ’gainst her. And I ain’t thanked you yet for saving Sammy. He”—and Bob’s voice grew quite husky—“is the only friend I has in the world. That’s truth. And I owe it to Sir Leonard at the Court. That’s truth, too. I’d have turned y’ out of my place quicker than winking, lad, if you’d told me you b’longed to the Court.”

“We’re going to the Court to-day,” said

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Donald slowly. "Hugh Trefford has asked us. Why do you hate his uncle?"

Foxy Bob gave him a queer look.

"I'll tell you another day," he replied, "that's to say, if ever you come along this way. I s'pose you won't, though! There's too many black tales 'gainst Foxy Bob. You'll not come a-near. That's a pity. You saved Sammy—and I've kinder taken to you."

He spoke in a half-wistful tone, and Donald held out his uninjured hand.

"I'll have to go home now," he replied, "but, of course, I'll come again. I never knew of anyone living in a house like this—and I shall want to hear about Sammy. Can you tell me the way home? Will I have to go back through the woods?"

He was glad when Bob said there was a much quicker way back by the road. Coming out for such very early morning adventures, and getting one's hand caught in a trap, make one rather tired, and Donald's steps lagged in the most stupid manner before he reached the brown gate with "Clinton Lodge" painted on it.

Foxy Bob had left him at the corner, and

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gone back to his queer hut. Donald smiled to himself as he thought how Leslie would like to pry round that strange home. Then Leslie and Stella themselves came rushing out to greet him with quite a storm of questions.

"Breakfast's been over *ages*," said Stella, "and I'm afraid Aunt Nance is rather vexed. I told her it wasn't a bit like you to go off like that. It was much more like Leslie—only he's a sleepy-head!"

"Where have you been?" asked Leslie. "How did you hurt your hand? Have you found out anything exciting?"

Donald told his story as they walked up the carriage drive and went round by the back door to save ringing the bell. Really, Leslie was quite sorry that he had not been energetic for once.

"I shall go and see Foxey Bob," he said, "And I think he's a jolly sensible man not to live in a proper house. Did you ask him whether there were any caves about?"

Donald had no time to answer this, for he had just spied Aunt Nance on the stairs and hastened to tell her he was sorry to be late. It took him a long while to tell that round-

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about story, and Aunt Nance shook her head when he showed her his hand.

“That’s the worst part of the business,” she said in her brisk way. “I don’t blame you for getting up early. I like boys and girls to be brisk and busy! I’m brisk and busy myself, though I’m an old woman of fifty. As to saving Foxey Bob’s pet, I’d have been ashamed of you if you’d left any creature to suffer. Only, *you’ll* have to suffer too, my dear, since I intend to put iodine on that torn hand to guard against any poisoning. It’ll hurt, but it’s the surest cure.”

Donald smiled. He knew Aunt Nance liked him, and he liked her. She was so different from many grown-ups, who always scold about adventures when they end in accidents! So Donald set his teeth hard and scarcely winced, though the iodine stung and smarted very much. Aunt Nance patted him on the back after the hand was tied up again, and then handed him over to cook for his breakfast.

Donald was as brisk as a bee again after that liberal helping of ham and eggs, and presently joined the others in the garden, where they were waiting for him.

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“Isn’t our cook nice?” said Leslie. “When I have a house of my own I shall choose the very fattest cook I can find, because they are always so good-natured. I think I shall choose a fat wife, too. Now, we must hurry up, for it is nearly ten o’clock, and I want to see all over the Court. Agnes says there are not any dungeons, but she believes there is a ghost, and, anyhow, there is a secret room.”

“And an aviary full of lovely birds,” added Stella, with a little skip of glee, “and a river—quite a little one—and horses and cows and pigs. Mustn’t Hugh have a jolly time!”

“He doesn’t look so awfully jolly,” replied Donald. “Anyhow—there he is by the pump. He doesn’t look as if he likes being kept waiting, either!”

Donald was very “noticing,” but luckily the frown on Hugh’s face did not remain there very long. Stella and Leslie were so eager to hear about all they were going to see, and that pleased Hugh tremendously. He was very proud of his home, for it had always been “home” to him since he had come to live with his uncle when he was a very tiny boy.

Hugh’s parents had died in Africa, where

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his father had gone to live on account of his delicate health. Hugh had only the very haziest recollection of the tall, thin man with the kind eyes, who had played with him and carried him on his shoulder round the farm, letting him stroke the woolly lambs and the brown baby calf; though his memory of the pretty mother who had kissed and petted him, and given him shiny beads to play with, was clearer. Then both father and mother had died of malarial fever within one short week, and Hugh had come in the great steamer over the seas to live here in this dear old house with Uncle Leonard, and old Susan, and all sorts of new friends. But, nevertheless, he had been very lonely at the Court; so that, though he lived in a splendid house and had a pony and all sorts of pets, life for him was not all that it might have been. He was fond of his Uncle Leonard, but very much in awe of him; and all his real love was lavished on the old grey house and the lovely grounds surrounding it.

Stella understood, better than the boys, that it was not merely "pride" which made Hugh so eager to show the new comrades



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all the splendid rooms and galleries of the Court.

“Where’s the ghost?” asked Leslie, as they crossed the picture gallery; “and the secret room?”

Donald was looking out of the window, longing to go and see the pony, Sinbad, and the pigeons and cows and other farmyard delights.

Hugh laughed. He liked Stella and Leslie better than Donald, and had not shown any interest in the tale of the wounded fox.

“It’s really quite dull, though it sounds grand,” he replied. “Look at this round knob in the panel. You can press it yourself, if you like.”

Leslie *did* like, and didn’t he jump, too, when the panel slid sharply back, revealing the dullest of square rooms, which was quite empty!

“Was anyone killed here?” asked Leslie, “or starved to death? I was hoping to find a skeleton.”

Hugh chuckled as he led the way out.

“There are some stories about it,” he replied, “but the only true one sounds impos-

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sible. One of the old Treffords once shut up his cousin in here to starve to death, because he was really the heir; and when he thought better of it, and came to let him out, the man had vanished—not even his clothes were found. Now come and see Sinbad, and Polly the cow. Polly's calf is the sweetest little thing. Would you like to give her a name, Stella?"

Stella was delighted, and was thinking hard of a really pretty name—not quite so common as Buttercup or Daisy—all the way to the farmyard. For it was a real farmyard, and Stella went almost crazy with excitement over the broods of fluffy yellow chicks, the baby ducks, and the ridiculous spotted piglets, which seemed to be playing follow-my-leader round a heap of refuse in the middle of the yard.

"If those pigs were washed and brushed," said Leslie thoughtfully, "they would be rather jolly. What a pity they like the dirt so much!"

He happened to look at Stella and Donald as he said this, and blushed as he saw the broad smiles of amusement creep over their

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faces. For when Leslie went on one of his own special rambles, he invariably returned in very great—yes, *very* great need of a wash!

Hugh took no notice of the pigs, but led the way to the shed where Polly, the cow, was mothering the prettiest fawn-and-white calf.

Stella suggested that the latter should be called “Cosy,” because it looked so cosy and sweet, and James, the cowman, thought it a very good name. Leslie disappeared before they left the cow-sheds, and Stella had some slight misgivings that he might be found washing the spotted pigs!

Hugh still had his pony and the aviary to show his visitors, and then suggested a game of rounders in the field, as it was too early in the year for cricket on the proper pitch.

Stella would rather have stayed to make friends with those dainty, saucy little birds, who were so happily content amongst the mossy boughs of the aviary, but she was always ready to give way to the boys in the matter of games.

“Where’s Leslie?” asked Hugh, missing

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him for the first time, and soon the farmyard and garden were ringing with shouts for the absent boy.

Having quite satisfied herself that Leslie was not washing pigs, Stella made a suggestion.

“It would be just like him to go back to the secret room,” she said; “he did not want to come away. That sort of thing fascinates him. He wanted to know if there were any caves about.”

Hugh led the way back to the house. He was rather annoyed at the delay. Like most young folk who have never had playmates, he had come to regard himself as the only one to be considered. His uncle had noticed this of late, and had made arrangements for Hugh to go to a boarding-school at Eastbourne next term, though it was a subject seldom mentioned between them. Hugh dreaded the thought of leaving home, and shrank from hearing the word “school.” Perhaps he was even hoping his uncle would change his mind—especially if these new friends came to settle in the neighbourhood.

New—friends. But were they going to be

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friends? If so, they must be readier to do what he suggested.

“Listen,” said Stella, as they ran down the long gallery. “I heard someone call. I am sure I was right—Leslie is in the secret room.”

Hugh pressed the knob of the panel, which slipped back.

Donald was the first to peer into the dark little room beyond.

“It is empty!” he cried in dismay. “And yet—why, I’m *sure* I heard Lesle’s voice.”

## CHAPTER III

### ALL ABOUT ANCESTORS

**W**HERE was Leslie? Even Hugh was quite puzzled.

"I'm positive I heard his voice," said Stella anxiously, "and it sounded somewhere underneath. Is there another secret room?"

"No," replied Hugh. "I can't understand it. Look outside, Donald. He must be having a game with us!"

"Listen," urged Stella, holding up one hand, and placing her ear to the panelled wall opposite the secret door. "There's somebody the other side of this—I heard footsteps. Oh!"

Hugh gave quite as startled a jump as Stella, for three knocks sounded on that wall in truly ghostly fashion. Stella clutched at Donald, but the latter's face was broadening into a grin.

"Ghosts don't chuckle," said he. "Of course, Leslie has found another entrance to



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your secret room, Hugh—that's to say, if you didn't know of it."

"It's quite impossible," said Hugh firmly; but his mouth and eyes became round with astonishment when part of the back wall seemed to slip down through the floor, and there stood Leslie, looking like the veriest tinker, but smiling broadly.

"Stairs," said he, "and I think it is a blocked-up window. It was too jolly dark to see properly. Did you know, Hugh?"

Hugh was too surprised to be able to answer at first. Possibly he was a wee bit annoyed, too, that a stranger on his first visit to the Court should discover the great secret of which generations of Treffords had been in ignorance. But eagerness to explore the staircase overcame vexation.

"Uncle Leonard will be awfully excited," he said. "It must have been by this stair that Sir Brian Trefford escaped in the eighteenth century. Only, I can't understand about the window."

The game of rounders was quite forgotten, and Hugh led the way down the narrow stone

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staircase, which only just allowed them to descend in single file.

"Prisoners in the secret chamber would hardly expect to find this way out," said Donald. "And—whew! It *is* stuffy—worse than Foxey Bob's hut."

"Foxey Bob?" echoed Hugh over his shoulder. "You don't mean to say you've been near his hut? I wonder he didn't half murder you. He never allows anyone to go near. And the only one who ever ventured there got his ankle bitten by a half-tamed fox. Hullo—this can't be the way out. There's a kind of door here, but we aren't near the ground floor yet."

"No," replied Donald; "but don't you see, it's not a door at all. Les was right. It's a boarded or bricked-up window. *I* call it rather a clever idea. Anyone would expect a stair to lead down to a door, but it doesn't. It leads to a window. I suppose the ivy is pretty thick outside, or you would have noticed it long ago."

Hugh bit his lip. It was the most curious sensation, this being "put right" about his ancestral home. But he did not reply. After

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all, these new-comers *had* discovered the Court secret, and he knew he ought not to be jealous. But it was something very like cheek on Donald's part to tell him that what he called a door was a window.

"You must tell us all your old family legends, Hugh, after dinner," coaxed Stella. "We *are* enjoying ourselves. I love exploring."

Hugh brightened. "I must go and tell Uncle Leonard about this," he replied. "He will be so pleased that he may let me have the key of the old chest as a special favour. It is years since I peeped inside that chest; it's full of fine old clothes, you know, which belonged to my ancestors. Last time, I had a little visitor playing with me, and she tore some of the lace on ever such a grand dress."

"We could dress up and play at being ancestors," suggested Leslie. "Oh dear, I suppose I shall have to wash my hands and face before dinner. What a pity it is that now I am properly dirty I can't go and wash the spotted pigs!"

But Hugh was taking the discovery of that stair much more seriously. A narrow

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stone stair, which only just led to a bricked-up window, did not seem wildly exciting to the young Garrocks, who, after they had walked round and round and up and down that stuffy space and quite failed to find hidden treasure or mouldering bones, would have preferred to go back into the gardens. But Hugh did not appear to think it possible that anyone could want to go beyond that mysterious stair, and Sir Leonard, who was brought to see the grand discovery, was equally delighted. Sir Leonard was very big and very imposing, with a fair beard and blue eyes which looked kindly at the young visitors from behind gold-rimmed spectacles. They were very sad eyes, so Stella thought, and she could not imagine Hugh's uncle romping with them as their own father did.

It was rather a relief when the dinner-gong sounded and they at last said good-bye to the secret chamber.

Dinner is usually an interesting function to hungry boys and girls, and the Garrock children looked with great approval at the roast chicken and ham, while a slow smile broke round Leslie's lips at the sight, later on, of

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meringues and trifle ; it was difficult to know which to choose, but Leslie decided on trifle, —there was so much more to eat !

Sir Leonard, as Hugh had hoped, gave permission for them all to go up to the Blue Room, where that chest of ancient glories stood ; though he added that if the children took his advice they would go out for a run in the grounds first.

“ One game of rounders,” said Hugh, leading the way ; “ then we’ll have a fine time.”

“ How long are we to stay ? ” asked Stella. “ Aunt Nance said she hoped you would come back with us to tea.”

So it was arranged that when they had finished inspecting the treasures of the chest, they should return to Clinton Lodge.

“ Shall we see your uncle again, too ? ” added Donald. “ Don’t you remember, Leslie and Stella, we were going to ask if we might make a camp somewhere in the woods ? We thought there might be some part of the woods not quite so private as others. If we had a camp we could play heaps of games all through the holidays.”

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"We've always longed for a wood," laughed Stella, "so that we could play at Robin Hood and his merry men."

"And cowboys in the Wild West," said Leslie.

"Or explorers for gold," added Donald.

Hugh's eyes gleamed with excitement. He had never thought of actually playing such games, though he loved Wild West stories, as well as those of Robin Hood.

"Ringo could come, too, couldn't he?" he said eagerly. "I'd hate to leave him behind. You see, before you came he was my only friend."

The game of rounders was not a very long one. Hugh was a fast runner, but rather a "butter-fingers" with the ball, and he could not altogether help showing his vexation when he missed it.

It would take him some time to get used to playing with these new friends. Previous to this he had been the leader in the few games he had had with visitors, and it was not quite nice to be treated by these three children as rather an inferior player.

"Are we going to dress up?" asked Stella,



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a little later, as Hugh busily unfastened the shutters in the big Blue Room.

“Of *course*,” said Leslie gaily; “it wouldn’t be much fun only looking at the things.” And he pulled off his coat as a good start.

“We shall have to be awfully careful,” warned Hugh. “Uncle Leonard will never let us have the dresses out again if we damage them.”

“I hope there’s a sword,” said Donald. “Wouldn’t it be best to lay everything out all round the room, and then choose what we are going to dress up in?”

Hugh had no objection to this, though again he felt that *he* ought to have been left to make the suggestion.

Stella clapped her hands gleefully at sight of a rose-coloured satin gown, with wonderful embroidery.

“But you can’t put *that* on,” said Donald, laughing. “You would be swallowed up in it. I believe it is almost big enough for Aunt Nance’s fat cook.”

Leslie was slipping his hand down into a corner of the chest, and after a bit of tugging, brought a long sword into view.

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"It's not a sword, though," explained Hugh in superior fashion; "it's only a foil. There are two of them. They have been used in fighting real duels. I used to be rather afraid of them at one time, because I thought there was human blood on the steel, but it is only rust. There, this is what I was looking for," and he held up a black velvet suit, with curious little puffings of blue satin, which did not look a bit too big for Leslie.

"It's a page's suit," said Hugh. "It belonged to a Paul Trefford, who was killed by falling into a well. His picture is in the gallery. If you like to put it on, Leslie, you can."

Leslie was only too ready.

"I hate trying on ordinary clothes, it's such a waste of time," he declared. "But these are different. I wonder what cook and Agnes would say if they saw me now."

"They wouldn't give you sticky jam tarts, anyway," said Stella. "Oh, look at this green kirtle thing. It's quite small—and a quilted skirt! One of your lady ancestors must have been very short, Hugh."

Hugh seemed to know all about it.

"Lady Elinor Trefford had her portrait

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painted in those clothes," he said. "She was an earl's daughter—and rather wicked. People called her a witch, and she haunts the gallery—at least, she is supposed to. Ye-es, you can try on the clothes, Stella, but we must put them back carefully."

"You are as good as a guide book," laughed Donald. "Is there going to be a suit for me? If not, I might just wear this cap, with the feathers at the side. But we shall never be able to burrow to the bottom of the chest at this rate. Are there any more swords?"

"Two rapiers and a gilt-handled dagger," said Hugh. "And, yes, here are a velvet coat and knee-breeches for you, Donald; we may as well all dress up and go to the gallery. Then I can tell you stories about my ancestors. I—I can't help being proud of them."

"Excepting the witch," added Stella. "I wonder if wearing her clothes will bewitch me. I ought to have a broom-stick. Oh, Leslie, you do look fine—and just like an imp with that funny cap."

They all looked very "fine" by the time they had arrayed themselves in those old-world garments, and the great, quiet Blue Room

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rang with merry laughter as it had not rung for years.

Stella suggested that they should go and show themselves to the servants, as they would have done at home, but Hugh was too shy, and puzzled his companions by adding that perhaps Uncle Leonard would not like it.

Stella, gazing into the mirror at her rosy face under its quaint hood, wrinkled up her nose thoughtfully. Hugh's home was full of discoveries and loveliness, but somehow—it did not seem quite like a home at all. It was too grand and stiff.

There was nothing stiff, though, about the "ancestors" who raced along the passage and down the very short flight of steps leading to the long gallery.

Leslie had the best of it in his page's dress, and went skipping and twirling down between the rows of Hugh's solemn-eyed and pictured ancestors, without the least shadow of respect for their dignity.

Lady Elinor had to grasp her quilted skirts in both hands and raise them high over her ankles before she could walk at all.

"I'm sure she never wore these clothes

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when she rode on her broom-stick," Stella complained. "How dull it must have been to have to walk so slowly!"

Hugh and Donald had brought the foils with them, because Hugh said gentlemen in the old days always carried swords.

"They must have been heaps braver than men are now," he sighed, as he halted beneath the picture of a very proud-looking cavalier. "This is a Sir Hugh Trefford who lived during the Civil War. He was killed when he was twenty-nine, and he had fought forty duels!"

Donald looked up at the dark, handsome face, with its haughty expression.

"I don't see that *that* made him brave," he said in his slow way. "It might much more likely have shown he was a—well, not exactly a coward, but rather a bully. For if he fought all those duels, he must have known he was a better swordsman than other people. And it wasn't quite fair."

Hugh flushed angrily.

"Of course it was fair!" he retorted. "My ancestors were all—or nearly all—brave as lions. And they were gentlemen, too. They would never have fought dishonourably."

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"Of course not," put in Stella. "Never mind ancestors. Come and join hands and let us dance a sort of minuet down the gallery."

But Donald was still following his own train of thought, without noticing Hugh's vexation.

"I don't call it brave at all to fight a man whom you know you will kill, or conquer, because he can't use his sword as well as you," he argued. "The men who fought duels in the old days *were* cowardly in that sense. And conceited, too! A brave man is a man who likes to fight when the odds are against him, *I* think, and for some decent reason—not just because he wants to show his cleverness."

"You don't know what you're talking about," burst out Hugh wrathfully. "All gentlemen fought duels in the old days. I don't suppose you ever had any ancestors, or you wouldn't talk like that."

Donald laughed. He was vexed, too, and felt that he would like to tell Hugh he was very stupid.

"It doesn't need ancestors to teach you what courage means," he said, rather loftily. "In the War, the Tommies were quite as brave



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as the officers. And my father always says true courage isn't just a matter of who has the biggest fists. I don't say your ancestors weren't brave men, but I'm sure fighting duels didn't *make* them brave. Courage is doing the right thing—and fighting for it, if you have to fight."

"I wish I hadn't shown you my ancestors!" stormed Hugh. "I'm not going to stand hearing you run them down. I—I——"

He paused. Donald also had flushed hotly; both boys were on the verge of a sharp quarrel, and I fancy they were rather glad when Stella interrupted again.

"Bother ancestors!" she said; "what a good thing we can't have them in the camp in the wood! And, I say, Hugh, have you ever boiled a kettle over a gipsy fire?"

She talked to Hugh, but she had slipped her hand into Donald's, and was squeezing it hard.

Donald knew what the squeeze meant, and his "prickles" felt as though they were being stroked down the right way. They had planned to take Hugh as a comrade because he must have been so dull by himself, and it was too

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bad to start squabbling. So Donald laughed good-naturedly, and turned to him.

"Camping is jolly fun," he said. "Shall we take off these clothes, and go and find your uncle to ask about the woods? If we don't, we *might* start fighting a duel on our own."

Hugh did not find it quite so easy to shake off the prickly feeling. When you live all alone with grown-ups you do find these little difficulties, and Hugh was not really of a sulky disposition. It was just that he took up the cudgels too hotly over things that did not much matter.

Stella gave a skip of relief as she freed herself from the witch's petticoats.

"I'm glad *I* wasn't an ancestor," she said, so comically that they all had to laugh.

Leslie felt particularly sorry at having to take off his black velvet suit. He liked it immensely, and I am afraid if any opportunity for mischief had come his way, he would only have remembered that pages were generally mischievous young rascals, and would have forgotten all about respect for black velvet suits.

Hugh lingered behind the others finally to close and lock the chest. Really, he was fight-

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ing down that aggravating little imp of pride. For he realized, now, that Donald had been right and he wrong. That was bad—Hugh liked always to be in the right. Worse still, he hated owning he was wrong. But if he did not do so now, he knew he would not enjoy his visit to Clinton Lodge, and there would, on his part at least, remain the little stiff feeling between himself and Donald. He was glad that, when he overtook the latter, Stella and Leslie were on ahead, gone to inspect the stuffed head of an ibex.

Hugh's apology was a trifle gruff and hurried, but it was quite enough. Donald's friendly grin and outstretched hand were a great relief to him, and Donald's answer was given heartily.

"It's jolly fine of you to say it," he said, "and I dare say I was a bit to blame too, you know. I say, by the way, are there any shops round here where we could get a bow and arrows? We shall want them if we're going to play Robin Hood."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PLANNING OF THE CAMP

“**I** LIKE Sir Leonard,” said Donald, as the three children sat perched upon the low garden wall after Hugh and Ringo had gone that evening. “And it’s ripping to have leave to make our camp in the woods. I wonder which would be the best place. I’ve a good mind to go and ask Foxey Bob. Will you come, Leslie? It won’t be dark for ages.”

Leslie nodded.

“I want to see the fox,” he said. “What are you going to do, Stella? Shall you come?”

“No,” replied Stella. “I think I’ll go in and talk to Agnes. Aunt Nance has gone to a meeting. I’m glad she didn’t ask us to go with her. It sounded so dull. Agnes does needlework in the servants’ room, after tea, and cook goes to sleep. I want Agnes to tell me about Sir Leonard’s little boy.”

“About Hugh?” asked Donald. “What can she know about Hugh? It would be

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much better if you asked her to let you rummage in the attic for things for the camp. We shall want some sort of old striped blanket for the tent. If Aunt Nance hasn't got such a thing we must club together and see if we can buy one."

"I didn't mean about Hugh," pursued Stella. "Agnes told me Sir Leonard had a little boy of his own, and he was stolen about eight years ago. She promised to tell me while she was sewing. Perhaps we'd better leave rummaging the attic till Aunt Nance comes back. Agnes couldn't give us the things we want without her permission."

The boys were rather reluctant to visit Foxey Bob after this. The story of a real stolen child promised to be so immensely interesting. Leslie began to ask all sorts of questions which Stella, of course, could not answer.

"When you come back," she promised, "you shall hear all about it. I wonder Hugh didn't tell us, but perhaps he does not like to talk of it. He could hardly remember the child, anyhow."

Donald took a flying leap from the wall into a bed of nettles. He had thought he

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could clear the latter and reach the grassy border of the lane; but oh! how quickly he skipped away on to the road!

"Beastly things!" he gasped. "They *do* sting. I wonder why there ever were nettles. They aren't any use."

"Yes, they are," retorted Leslie, who had wisely crawled farther along the wall and let himself down into the lane beyond the ditch. "Nettle tea is awfully good for curing spots. If you drink nettle tea when you get out of bed, every day through March, you never get a spot. Cookie at home told me so."

"Well, the sooner we ask Foxey Bob to choose our camping ground, the sooner we shall be home for Stella to spin us her yarn," said Donald, who had armed himself with a switch, and was cutting off the heads of offending nettles.

But Leslie was not going to be hustled. He had not seen half the things he wanted to see along that country lane, and though to-day there were no yellow frogs to be made prisoners, he discovered the daintiest of moss nests in the bank, with pale, bluish green eggs, speckled with black spots.



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“I’m going to mark the place,” he told Donald, “and watch to see what happens. I suppose the mother bird will start hatching them soon, and we might take home one of the birds when it is old enough. I wonder what sort they are.”

“*Are* you going to birds’-nest and flower-hunt?” asked poor Donald; “or are you coming to find Bob? You said you wanted to see Sammy. A tame fox is more interesting than birds’ eggs.”

Leslie grinned.

“I like them all,” he replied. “I think Foxey Bob must have a ripping time living out of doors all his life.”

“His hut isn’t out of doors,” said Donald. “It’s *fusty*. And if you start Paul Prying amongst his things, you’ll never get back to Clinton Lodge to-night.”

There was not going to be any chance, however, for Leslie to inspect Foxey Bob’s jumbled, untidy hut, for the door was locked, and no one answered their knockings.

Too bad! Foxey Bob was not at home, and he had no neighbours to tell them where he was. It was growing dark, too.

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“ We’ll go round the woods,” said Donald, who, when he once got an idea into his head, liked to pursue it to the end. “ And we shall be able to choose the camping ground ourselves. Sir Leonard said he didn’t preserve this wood, and we could pitch our tent anywhere we liked.”

There proved to be so many ideal spots for a camp in the wood, however, that the boys found it difficult to make up their minds which to choose, and they both got quite a shock as they stood arguing, for, from behind a quantity of undergrowth, a fat rabbit came scampering out, while almost at once a tall figure rose into view.

Leslie made a dash to catch the rabbit, and Donald gave a little cry of welcome.

“ It’s Bob ! ” said he.

Foxy Bob did not look quite pleased to see the boys, and he stood frowning at them.

“ What d’you want ? ” he asked. “ Did you think you’d come and watch a bit of ferriting, now ? ’Ware Nicky ! ”

Neither Leslie nor Donald knew what “ ’Ware Nicky ” meant, but Leslie had spied a little white animal with very pink eyes and

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a long body, which just then came crawling out of a burrow.

"Is that Nicky?" he asked; but, before he could stoop to stroke the little creature, hurried footsteps sounded from behind the trees.

Foxy Bob heard those footsteps, and he did not even stop to pick up Nicky. Away he dashed, and had disappeared from view before the bushes parted and a very red-faced man in gamekeeper's dress sprang into the clearing.

Leslie was standing quite close to the strange white animal, and Donald was just behind. They stared in surprise at the newcomer, who seemed very angry about something.

"Where's Foxy?" he shouted. "I thought I'd nabbed him, then. And it's nothing but a couple of boys! Hey, you there, what do you mean by poaching in the Manor Woods?"

"We're *not* poaching," retorted Donald sturdily, though he had guessed by now what Bob had been after. "And Sir Leonard gave us leave to choose a camping ground here."

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This speech only made Greenley, the keeper, shout more loudly.

"You have the impudence to stand there and lie to me," he stormed, "when you're caught red-'anded with that ferret, there? You young rascals! I've half a mind to have you up at the Court straight away. What's your names, eh? You ain't b'longing to the village."

"We are Miss Garrock's nephews," said Donald, "and the ferret isn't ours. We don't tell lies, and you can take us to the Court if you like. We were there all this afternoon."

Greenley muttered at this, but, though he still seemed angry, he did not talk of taking the trespassers into custody. It was Nicky, the ferret, who was made prisoner instead, while the keeper proceeded to give the boys what he called "good advice."

"I guess it's Foxey Bob's ferret," he said, "and he won't get it again in a hurry! And you listen to me, young masters. I heard as Miss Garrock had her nevvies staying with her, and Miss Garrock's a lady I respects very much. So we won't say no more of this, and I'll be seeing Sir Leonard about the camping.

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But there's a true saying as boys *will* be boys, and another to put alongside of it—that birds of a feather flock together! So if you don't want to give your good aunt trouble and bring yourselves into disgrace, you'll have no more to do with Foxey Bob, who's a poacher and a real bad lot, and, if right was right, ought to be in prison. And so good evenin' to you, young masters, and make haste home before it's dark."

It was a long speech, and several times while Greenley was talking both Donald and Leslie would have liked to interrupt and *argue*. It was too bad to say they were poaching, when they had not even known Foxey Bob was in the wood. But neither Donald nor Leslie meant to give the man away. He might be a poacher, he might even be a "bad lot," but Donald for one had chummed up with the man of the waste lands, and Leslie was always sure that Donald's decisions about things like this were right. So, though the boys did not argue with the keeper on account of Foxey Bob, they did not feel very much like talking during their walk home.

"After all," sighed Donald, as they pushed

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open the garden gate, "it would have been better to stay and listen to Agnes's story."

Leslie agreed, though not very wholeheartedly.

"I should like to know what will become of the ferret," he added, "and—er—Donald, shall you ever go again to see Sammy?"

"Yes," said Donald, "*and* Bob. I promised, and—I believe he isn't a bad man, really. It's because people are horrid to him, I expect. You know, when anyone says you are in a bad temper you can't help getting into one! And if everyone calls you bad—you get bad, or don't want to try and be better."

Leslie chuckled.

"And when everyone calls you Paul Pry, you *are* Paul Pry," said he. "That's me! Now I want to hear about Sir Leonard's stolen son."

Stella was sitting over the fire all in the dark, in the room Aunt Nance had given them for their special use. They thought it a jolly little room, for there were no ornaments to break, and no carpet—only linoleum, which would wash; there was not even a table-cloth,



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which the boys thought most sensible, since it is so easy to upset ink, or glue, or anything upsettable on table-cloths—and the nicer they are the more certain it is that they'll get spoilt!

Stella was curled up on the floor, toasting her face in the fire glow. She actually forgot to ask about the camping ground, as she stretched up her hands and pulled a boy down on each side of her.

"Agnes has been making me nearly cry," she confessed. "Oh, I don't mean because I've been getting into trouble," she added, hastily. "She's been telling me how Sir Leonard came to have that sad look in his eyes."

"Fire ahead," urged Donald. "We've been thinking of the story all the way home."

"It happened before Hugh came to the Court," said Stella. "Sir Leonard's wife died when their little boy, Keith, was a year old. Sir Leonard was terribly upset—it nearly broke his heart. But he loved the baby tremendously. Agnes said he was a beautiful boy, the image of his mother, and she was very dark. Keith was almost like an

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Italian boy, and a darling. When he was four years old he was out in the plantation with his nurse, and she was talking to one of the gardeners. She didn't miss Keith at first, but when she came to look for him he had disappeared.

“It was a terrible business, Agnes said. The nurse nearly went crazy. They searched the gardens and the plantations and the woods; detectives came from London, even; and in the end all they could suppose was that the little boy had climbed over the bank into the wood and reached the river, where he had fallen in and been drowned. Other people said they believed he had been stolen, but there were no gipsies about, and there was no trace or clue to follow up. Agnes said it was just as if the ground had opened and swallowed him. Sir Leonard has never got over it, Agnes told me, and everyone said he would have died if it had not been for Hugh coming, though he doesn't seem to take a very great deal of notice even of him. The house-keeper at the Court told cook Sir Leonard was like a man in a dream, who never quite woke up to see the folk around him.”

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The boys listened very quietly, and though, of course, they did not cry, they looked quite sad and serious over the tragic story.

"I suppose that is why Hugh came to live here," mused Leslie.

"It was just about then that his parents died in Africa," Stella explained, "and Sir Leonard cabled out to say he would adopt him. Hugh came here, and has lived here ever since. Now, of course, he is the heir—unless the little lost boy is still alive."

"I think it was worse than if Keith had been found dead," declared Donald. "I expect Sir Leonard is always wondering if he is still alive, and—unhappy somewhere."

"The nurse *must* have felt a beast," said Leslie. "I should have wanted to run away and never come back again. Hugh must be sorry for his uncle. I wish I could find the lost boy, but after eight years it isn't very likely, is it, that anyone will? And if he were found, Hugh would not be heir to the Court. Poor Hugh! Now let's talk about something else. I was thinking, Donald, I've got my new pocket-knife, and if we can't buy a

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bow and arrows to-morrow, we might make them ourselves. Arrows wouldn't be very hard to make, especially as Aunt Nance keeps hens."

It was rather a big jump from a lost heir to a holiday camping ground, but thoughts of the fun they were going to have in the woods soon helped the three youngsters to forget Sir Leonard's sad history.

Donald revelled in such schemes, and, behind that stolid, matter-of-fact manner of his, I believe he was always busy dreaming wonderful dreams of adventure. The big old chest of clothes up at the Court, as well as the Court, itself, were the things which appealed to Donald, just as spotted pigs, tame foxes, rabbits, ferrets and birds appealed to Leslie.

"We can't be cowboys *and* Robin Hoods at the same time," said Stella. "Do let's have Robin Hood first, so that I can be Maid Marion. I shall make the camp nice, while you three go out into the Greenwood."

"I suppose Hugh had better be Robin Hood," said Donald with a sigh, "and I can be Little John, and Leslie, Friar Tuck."

"And the keeper who called us poachers

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shall be the Sheriff of Nottingham," laughed Leslie. "How he would roar if we tied him to a tree!"

It had been arranged for Hugh to meet them at the gate leading through into the wood, just beyond the village. Ringo was not going to be invited to join the merry band till after the camp had been pitched.

How Hugh did stare the next morning as, perched on the top of the gate, he spied his new friends coming down the lane! He almost had to rub his eyes to be sure it was they, for the young Garrocks looked like a party of gipsies without a caravan. Donald came first, trundling a wheelbarrow crowned by a large black cooking-pot. Leslie had two big garden baskets, wooden ones, piled with more goods, some of which looked like cookery stores; while Stella was tangled up in a striped blanket, which floated billowing behind her as she hugged a three-cornered stool and an earthenware jug.

"Why didn't you tell me what you were going to do?" asked Hugh reproachfully, as he jumped down from the gate and took Stella's stool. "I could have brought lots of

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things—and one of the gardeners could have helped.”

“It’s much nicer to do it all ourselves,” said Donald sturdily, “but to-morrow we might come up to the Court and help bring *your* things down, if you can collect them first.”

Hugh began to see that playing games with the Garrock children was a serious business, and his own enthusiasm was growing rapidly. These playmates were such a new experience—he was always getting surprises—and on the whole he liked them, though he could not help having the feeling of being left rather breathlessly behind, instead of being looked upon as leader.

Stella may have guessed this, for she patted his arm with her free hand.

“You’ll be much the best one to choose the camping ground,” she said. “Donald and Leslie thought Foxey Bob would tell them of a good one, but he was—er—out.”

Hugh frowned.

“Uncle Leonard wouldn’t like it a bit if we had anything to do with Bob,” he said. “I don’t want to be a prig, or set myself up,



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but—well ! he's a real terror. He hates Uncle Leonard, so Williams, the poultry boy, told me ages ago. I think it was because uncle sent him away from his cottage. There was a row, I know, but it was so long ago I don't suppose anyone remembers much about it; only Williams says that Bob lives in that hut of his on the waste land and poaches for spite, and Greenley gets furious because he never can catch him."

Donald kicked a fallen branch viciously from his path. It vexed him in the oddest way to find that no one had a good word to say for Foxey Bob. He did not think people were fair. It was, perhaps, as well that Robin Hood and his band should just then have reached one of the prettiest spots in the wood—a regular fairy glade, Stella declared, and chose it at once for her "bower."

"There's plenty of room for two tents, if we like," she said, in a very businesslike way, "and one would do for a kitchen, though the pot will have to live outside. We must have a gipsy fire."

"And a savoury stew," added Leslie. "We *are* going to do the thing in style. Do you

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think Aunt Nance would let us sleep out here one night ? ”

But Stella squashed the suggestion flat.

“ We shouldn’t like it if she did give us leave,” she concluded. “ Think of the crawling toads and owls, and all the horrid things that come out at night. We can have plenty of fun in the day-time—and now come and help dig a hole for the tent-pole.”

Aunt Nance had wondered whether her three charges would find it warm enough to play about in the woods, but if she had seen them at work she would have had no such fears. There were no idlers under the Greenwood Tree, and the four pairs of hands were almost blistered by the time the tent was erected, and three short iron rods had been firmly fixed a little distance away, forming a tripod for the black pot to be suspended over a fire.

Of course, as you will guess, Maid Marion and the three merrie men were eager to light the fire under that jolly pot, only—they had to decide first what they would cook.

Stella had a great idea.

“ We could make a plum pudding, couldn’t

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we ? ” she suggested. “ Cook has given us flour and two eggs and raisins and currants, and Leslie has some string. This piece of canvassy stuff will do for the pudding cloth.”

How the boys cheered !

“ You shall make the pudding and we’ll collect sticks and light the fire,” said Leslie, as Donald flattened the sides of the hole under the tripod till it made a grand Dutch-oven. The Dutch-oven was his own idea to make the kindling of sticks safer.

Hugh was finishing the erection of a stout pole, from which floated a strip of green silk. That was the camp flag, and very imposing it looked.

“ Shall we go back to the Court while the pudding is cooking ? ” he asked presently, as he stood watching Stella, who certainly looked like a cook—if a floury nose, floury chin and a pair of extremely sticky hands make one. “ I am sure we could find some old pieces of carpet to lay down inside the tent, and I have a strong, big box with a padlock, in which we could keep things.”

This was a question for consideration. It would take rather a long time to go to the

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Court and back, and would take still longer to collect the things.

“To-morrow,” said Donald, “we might get leave to bring our dinner here, then we should not have to bother about time. It is such lovely warm weather; aunt was saying to-day that it’s more like May than March, so she may not mind. I think now we’d almost better wait till this afternoon to light the fire and cook the pudding. Here, Stella, you’re not tying the string tight enough, and all the pudding will boil out.”

Stella laughed, as she stood watching her brother dealing with that delicious-looking brown dumpling of a pudding.

“I wonder if Robin Hood ever showed Maid Marion how she ought to cook,” said she demurely.

## CHAPTER V

### FEATHER AND FUN

FOR some days the Robin Hood band thought of little else but their camp. Stella was the very busiest of house-wives, and spent the evenings, when it was too dark to go out, in sewing all sorts of things for her "bower," as the boys called it. Leslie and Donald had to content themselves with the attic for their carpentering, as it made too much litter downstairs.

Hugh looked very wistful at times, when he heard of all the work planned for busy evenings, and finally Donald brought a petition to Aunt Nance asking if he might not come down to help.

"Hugh says his uncle wouldn't mind," added Donald, "and it is usually moonlight between seven and eight; and, if not, he has a fine electric torch."

So Hugh came down to join the working

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parties, and Aunt Nance, noticing how much brighter and happier the boy looked, wondered, pityingly, what he would do when those five weeks were over and his new friends gone.

Agnes and Eliza, the cook, had taken quite kindly to the young visitors, while Bun and Bounce were more than half inclined to desert their mistress in favour of Leslie. The only four-footed creature whose affection the latter could not win was that of Julius Cæsar; and so, of course, it was towards the winning of Julius Cæsar's heart that Leslie directed special efforts.

He was wonderfully patient about it, too, and would steal out to the orchard half a dozen times a day with a carrot or cake or some delicacy for the obstinate old donkey. Roger, the garden boy, would stand by chuckling.

"Julius Cæsar, he's a caution!" he would remark. "You won't never get him to have you on his back, Master Leslie."

"Oh, yes, I shall," was Leslie's reply "You wait and see. Then I shall ride him down to the village with a basket on my



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arm, the way Jack, the butcher's boy, rides his pony."

But Roger only closed one eye in a disbelieving wink.

The Robin Hood camp was the pride of the four children's hearts, and the council of outlaws had decided that now it was all quite finished they must start *being* outlaws. Donald had to explain this thoroughly to Hugh, who was still rather slow at understanding games.

"We must bring our dinner," said Donald, "and Maid Marion will cook it. Then we shall go on adventures. We shall have to 'toss up' about that. We can't all be Robin Hood's band. One of us—and sometimes two—will have to be enemies. Leslie would make a fine monk riding to Nottingham if he put on one of Stella's overalls and carried a sack and a staff. Then, another day, I could be the Sheriff."

Leslie smiled sweetly.

"Let me be the monk first," he urged. "And you can all be waiting to ambush me in the lane. Only remember, after you have taken me prisoner, you have to carry me to

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the Greenwood Tree and give me venison pasty. Some of the Court cook's veal and ham pies would do."

This sounded a promising beginning, though Leslie was very mysterious about his part. He would not even take Stella into his confidence, but went alone to the Court, where he had made more than one friend in the garden and kitchen.

Stella had coaxed Donald into lending her one of his flannel shirts and a pair of short grey knickers, and was going to be Little John for the day.

What fun it was! And the weather was srprisingly kind.

"It's the first of April to-day, you know," said Stella, as Robin Hood and his men lay hidden behind the hedge to pounce upon Monk Leslie, "and I'm sure Leslie is up to some of his tricks—he's had so many secret conversations with Roger, and with Slater at the Court, too."

Hugh laughed as he crawled up the bank. "It's a real sporty game," he declared. "I feel *quite* like Robin Hood."

"I only hope no animal or tramp will come

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along and eat the 'venison pasties' under our Greenwood Tree," added Stella.

"Hallo!" gasped Donald, suddenly.  
"What's this?"

A loud and protesting bray echoed down the lane, and the next moment a most unexpected cavalcade swung round the corner into sight. Upon the back of a gaily caparisoned Julius Cæsar rode a weird-looking monk, swathed in so many garments that he appeared to be a figure of portly size; his head was covered by a brown hood, and on either side of his steed swung sacks filled to bursting-point; while in the sack-covered figure which ran alongside it was difficult at first to recognize Roger, the garden boy.

Leslie must have coaxed many helpers into his service, but the most signal of his victories was that over Julius Cæsar, who trotted along raising his voice in a trumpet blast.

With a cheer of laughter and defiance, Robin Hood and his merry men dashed out upon the monk.

"Hurrah!" shouted Leslie. "Out upon ye, false knaves! Roger, good lad, have at the varlets! We'll give them good reason to

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repent their scurvy—scurvy—Hey! Whoa-ho there, Julius Cæsar! Roger, ye varlet—the *sacks!*” and, grabbing one of those well-filled sacks in his own right hand, the valiant monk hurled it at Robin Hood, who was laughing too heartily to guard against attack.

Roger, the “varlet,” grinning widely, had seized the other sack, and, amidst the lusty braying of Julius and the shouts of Robin Hood and his men, the contents of those sacks were hurled—and emptied—over the heads of the robbers.

Feathers! Yes—actually feathers! The poultry-yards must have been ransacked for miles round, surely—or was the fact that several fowls had been killed at the Court yesterday the reason for so plentiful a supply of this quite new weapon of warfare?

No matter how Leslie and his friends had got them, there they were, and great was the rout of Robin Hood and his band. Laughing, choking, spluttering, waving their arms and shaking their heads to win free from those small tickling “arrows,” Robin Hood and Will Scarlet and Little John retired headlong into the ditch. But the monk was not left long to

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crow over his glorious victory, for Julius Cæsar disliked those feathers quite as much as did Robin Hood, and, irritated by the whirling, fluttering mysteries, Julius repeated his trumpet blast, ducked his head, and galloped off down the lane, overturning Roger into the ditch alongside Little John.

The monk most gallantly gripped the neck of his steed and resolved, now that he was once up, that he would not get down till he chose, and this resolve so angered Julius that he made straight for a pond which lay at the junction of the lane with the road near by. Deep into the mud and ooze of that unsavoury pond plunged Julius Cæsar, sending a number of ducks swimming off in a panic, while the poor monk sprawled along his back, with arms clasped nervously round the good steed's neck.

“Ehaw!” brayed Julius Cæsar.

“Quack! Quack!” gobbled the ducks.

“Hi!—help! Varlet—Roger—to me!” cried the monk, remembering his part even though in dire peril of a mud-bath.

And it was this picture which Robin Hood and his men beheld when they came racing up.

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What a revenge for a "feathery" defeat!

Hugh laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks, while Donald, kicking off his shoes and rolling his knickers up above his knees, waded through the mud with a grimace of comical disgust, and seized Julius Cæsar's bridle.

Even then the monk's troubles might not have been over, for the donkey, hesitating as to whether or not he should refuse to be guided from his watery stronghold, was in two minds about rolling luxuriously in the oozy mud. Roger, however, appeared at the critical moment with a tempting armful of sweet clover-hay, which settled the matter and brought the monk and his fiery steed back to safety.

"It was a glorious battle," laughed Maid Marion, as the party returned to the Greenwood Tree after Roger and Julius Cæsar had departed; "and won't those venison pasties taste good!"

And they did; especially to the monk, who, by common consent of Robin Hood and his merry men, was awarded an extra pie for his clever defence against the forest robbers.



## FEATHERS AND FUN

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“I don’t think we shall ever have time for Wild West adventures,” said Donald slowly, when the feast was over and it was time to go home. “Robin Hood is the jolliest game we’ve ever had.”

And Hugh’s voice was loudest in hearty agreement.

## CHAPTER VI

### FOXHEY BOB AGAIN

OF course, every day was not a sunny one during those holiday weeks at Aunt Nance's, and neither did every day pass without some little disagreement between the four playfellows.

"I do wish Hugh didn't always want to play games his own way," Stella sighed to Leslie, after one of those tiresome little disputes. "I suppose he can't help it, though; he has had so few friends to play with before."

Leslie was busy peeling a specially straight stick which was going to be an arrow. He was evidently thinking about something else.

"Donald was quite right this morning," he said, "about going into the town. Aunt Nance wanted us to go, and she doesn't often bother us. She's a jolly sort of aunt, and I think Clinton Lodge is a ripping house. We *are* having a lovely time."

Stella nodded. The holidays were passing

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all too quickly, and—though she was longing to see mother and dad—she knew they would all be very sorry to say good-bye to Anford, and Hugh, and Aunt Nance, and—oh, so many friends, both two-legged and four-legged.

“It’s funny about Donald and Hugh,” she said, “because, though they argue the most and get nearest to quarrelling sometimes, I really believe Hugh likes Donald best of us all. I suppose it is because they are so unlike each other.”

Leslie chuckled.

“Hugh flares and Donald smoulders,” he remarked, “but Donald likes Hugh awfully, all the same. He’s a sport, and he wants to play fair.”

“Listen,” said Stella, holding up her hand. “Was that a rabbit amongst the bushes?”

She and Leslie were down at the camp, getting things ready for another grand adventure game to-morrow. Hugh had promised to bring down one of those old-world dresses for Stella, and the cap with the long feather for Robin Hood. Donald had gone up to the Court with him to help carry them.

Sir Leonard had noticed the difference in

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his young nephew, and strongly approved of his friendship with the Garrock children. He specially liked Donald—the boy was so intensely British and honest-eyed! Since the arrival of the three young visitors at Clinton Lodge, the subject of school for Hugh had not been mentioned; yet Sir Leonard was telling himself that evidently it *was* companionship that the boy needed. He had quite lost his habit of mooning aimlessly about with Ringo at his heels, and always seemed in a bustle about some game or other with his new friends.

And so, when Hugh made his request to take some of the clothes from the chest to dress up for the Robin Hood adventures, Sir Leonard had good-naturedly agreed, adding that he would trust Hugh to take care of the things and replace them tidily.

“It will be much jollier, dressing up,” Hugh had said, glad to be able to suggest something that had not occurred to the others, and Donald had been eager to agree, although they had had some argument as to the most suitable clothes to choose.

Meantime, Stella and Leslie were kept

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waiting in the camp longer than they had expected.

"Rabbit?" asked Leslie in answer to his sister's question; "I don't think so. It might be a dog, or perhaps Donald and Hugh are trying to take us by surprise. Ho, there! Beware of my bow and arrow, if——"

"Don't," gasped Stella; "it's a man! Oh——"

A very shabby man, wearing a dirty old green coat and leathern gaiters, stood up facing them.

Leslie grinned.

"It's Foxey Bob," he said, for only a few days before he and Donald had paid a second, and more successful, visit to Sammy the fox and his master.

Foxey Bob did not look in a very good temper, and would have gone shuffling off if Leslie had not called him back.

"Come and look at our camp, Bob," he invited; "and, I say, have you got Sammy with you? I wanted to show him to my sister."

"Will you have a cake?" added Stella shyly. Foxey Bob was so gaunt that she thought he must be hungry.

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Bob hesitated, looking round. Perhaps he was looking for his first friend, Donald, or he may have been admiring the camp under the Greenwood Tree. Leslie was of opinion that it was a far nicer home than Bob's stuffy hut !

But, before they could do the honours of their woodland dwelling, Donald's whoop was heard, and there were the two boys, laden with a big cardboard box containing the coveted clothes, and a basket of provisions.

At sight of Hugh, Foxey Bob's scowl deepened, and Hugh, seeing who Stella's and Leslie's companion was, stiffened with indignation.

"Off you go, you vagabond!" he cried angrily. "We don't want you prowling round here. If you are found hanging about this part of the wood again, there'll be trouble Off you go!"

There was a queer glint in Foxey Bob's eyes as he listened, and though he obeyed Hugh's order, he looked at Donald as he went Donald, flushing very red, stood fidgeting first on one foot and then on the other. He knew that Bob was trespassing and that Hugh had every right to order him off, but he was vexed



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at the other boy's manner. It made him want to champion the man whom he had befriended. Stella was the first to speak.

"*I* asked Foxey Bob to look at the camp," she said, coming forward. "Why shouldn't he? He wasn't doing any harm."

"He's a regular poacher and loafer," replied Hugh loftily. "It's—it's wrong to have anything to do with him. Of course, if all of you encourage him, he'll come here one day and steal everything."

"I don't see you've any right to say that," said Donald shortly. "Foxey Bob is a friend of mine, and I don't believe he is a thief. Of course, he ought not to poach; that is a sort of thieving, I suppose. But Roger told me that people do not all look upon poaching in the same light; some say it's thieving, and others that it's nothing of the kind."

"You don't know anything about it," replied Hugh, nettled by Donald's plain speaking, "and it's not your business to interfere."

Donald bit his lip, then turned and walked away. Stella was nearly in tears.

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“That’s spoilt all our fun,” she told Hugh reproachfully, “and that *was* your fault. Donald is right about poor Bob. No one gives him a chance. If you were all kinder he would be—different.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” said Hugh obstinately. “He’s a thief, and Donald is a duffer to have anything to do with him. He’ll have to tell me he’s sorry for speaking like that when *I* was right.”

“Donald won’t do that—he’ll argue, instead,” said Leslie. “You ought to know that he rather likes arguing. I don’t. I like plenty of fun, and it would be awfully jolly of you if you would call Donald back. Say you forgot that to-day he is Robin Hood, who would think it only right to shoot the King’s deer!”

And actually Hugh yielded! He was surprised at himself, and Donald was surprised too; for after a tiff it was generally either Donald or Stella who had to make the first advances. Hugh could be generous enough afterwards—but he hated owning that he was in the wrong.

He did not exactly own it now, but he must have given Donald a chance to argue, for the

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boys returned to the Greenwood Tree talking very fast, and Hugh was smiling rather ruefully as he said he would "give it a try." Stella gave Leslie a glance of warning not to inquire what this "try" was.

Leslie was still Paul Pry—as everyone at Clinton Lodge knew by now—though it was rather a joke than anything else. "Master I-want-to-know" Aunt Nance sometimes called him, and Leslie had found several times that wanting to know too much ended in trouble!

That morning Aunt Nance had had to be very firm against the proposal of the Robin Hood band to take breakfast to the camp on the following day. She was of opinion that ten o'clock was quite early enough to start play.

"But we might have an omelet about eleven o'clock," was Leslie's brilliant idea, as, tired out, the four children walked home in the evening. "I'll persuade Eliza to lend me the frying-pan if you will bring the eggs, Hugh."

This seemed a fair arrangement, and Hugh was tying a remember-the-eggs knot in his handkerchief as he ran upstairs to his room.

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He always came down to the dining-room when Sir Leonard was alone, and made his supper of soup or fish and sweet. This evening he was late, and it was not until he was giving his hair a last vigorous brush that he remembered he had left those borrowed clothes in the camp. What a nuisance!

Hugh stood frowning at himself in the glass, brush in hand. If Uncle Leonard asked he would have to own up, and he hated the idea of a lecture—if not some punishment. Perhaps his uncle would forbid his going out with his friends to-morrow. Certainly he would not allow Hugh to borrow the things in the chest again. Too bad! The boy went downstairs, annoyed with himself, and inclined to blame others. If Stella had packed up the dress in the cardboard box and given it to him, as she ought to have done, of course he would have remembered.

As it happened, two old friends of Sir Leonard had been staying at the Court for the last few days, and they had only left that afternoon, so Hugh was almost a stranger, and his uncle greeted him with a kindly smile.

Throughout the meal, too, instead of sitting

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silent as usual, the baronet asked several questions, and endeavoured to lead Hugh to talk about his new friends and his games.

If only it had not been for his carelessness Hugh would have responded more eagerly, but as it was, he hardly liked to allude to Robin Hood for fear of inquiries being made about the dress and caps.

Sir Leonard, secretly disappointed at the boy's brief responses, ceased his questioning, and after dinner retired to his library.

Hugh ran off at once for his cap. He would go down to the woods, now, and fetch the things entrusted to his care. Otherwise he would be bothering all night about them.

It was moonlight, and the woods looked very black and gloomy by contrast. Hugh had plenty of pluck, though, and as he scrambled up the bank he could not help thinking what fun they might have if Miss Garrock would only allow Donald, Leslie and Stella to join him in a moonlight feast and adventure game.

"I do believe," thought he, stopping presently, and peering through the trees in puzzled scrutiny, "that they *are* having a feast without

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me! How mean! I'm sure I saw smoke—yes, and there's a flame. They have lighted the fire. I never would have thought they'd have done it without telling me. I'll just creep up and give them a scare. It will be a real raid of the foresters. What a joke!—and it will serve them right."

Thought of taking his friends by surprise made Hugh forget his grievance. He was laughing to himself as he crept close. He had never had the chance to be a boy scout, though he had often wished to be one, and this was quite a scouting game.

But—was that a fire lighted in the Dutch-oven? If so, how it was smoking! He could hardly see the camp at all. Why, the smoke was thickest round the tent, and great billows of it came drifting towards him. A sudden anxiety brought the boy to his feet with a cry of dismay.

"Donald! Leslie!" he shouted. "Where are you? What are you doing? The camp is on fire!"



## CHAPTER VII

### WHO BURNED THE CAMP ?

AS Hugh rushed through the clearing, he made a second and more startling discovery. Not only had the camp been set on fire, but by now it was completely destroyed !

The smoke drifted aside, and the dismayed boy saw a mere heap of ashes where a few hours earlier Robin Hood's green flag had waved so gallantly over the striped blanket tent.

Tears of disappointment and anger filled Hugh's eyes. He had, perhaps, been the proudest of the band in viewing their handiwork. Never had he played a more fascinating game, and he had planned all sorts of schemes to keep and improve that camp in the wood, even after the young Garrocks had gone. Now, all that remained of nearly a fortnight's work was a handful of ashes.

He looked around. The black cooking-pot still hung from its tripod—that alone had

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escaped. There were no signs of a fire having been lighted in the proper place beneath it. Then the blaze must have been caused by an accident—or design!

“Don—ald!” called Hugh. But there was no answer. The Garrock children were not there, had evidently not witnessed the great disaster. Hugh stood with clenched hands and throbbing pulses. He had just remembered that dress borrowed for Maid Marion, and the cap and hoods for himself, Donald and Leslie. They were burnt, too. Destroyed! Oh, how angry Uncle Leonard would be; how severely he would blame him! Hugh always prided himself on his trustworthiness, and now he had been let down by a simple act of neglect and forgetfulness. He had come back as soon as he could. Hugh told himself it was not really his fault at all.

And then, swift as a flash, came the thought of whose fault and doing it very well might be.

“It’s Foxey Bob,” he whispered to himself, “that’s who has done it. He—he knew I was in the game, and that most of the camp was mine, and he has done it out of spite, because he hates Uncle Leonard and me.”

## WHO BURNED THE CAMP?

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This idea brought the angry colour like a tide to his cheeks, and indignation rose to boiling point. Foxey Bob had destroyed the camp—and he should go to prison for it!

Hugh swung round on his heel as he heard heavy footsteps behind him. It was Greenley, the keeper, who had noticed the smell of burning and seen the smoke. He could hardly believe his eyes at sight of the boy standing there, amongst the ashes of the still smouldering fire.

“It’s that poacher, Foxey Bob,” Hugh cried. “I ordered him off this afternoon, and he’s done this out of spite. Sir—Sir Leonard will be ever so angry. Some things he prized very much have been burned. It’s too bad, and I hope the man will go to prison!”

He very nearly burst into tears as he spoke. It was a bitter blow; not only was it an end to much fun, but he was really worried and frightened at the prospect of telling his uncle of the burned clothes.

Greenley was very indignant and sympathetic, but rather sorry Hugh could give no better proof that Bob had been the culprit.

“That chap’s as artful as a weasel,” he

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declared, "and though it's certain as winking that he did set a match to all this here, we've got to prove it."

"There's no need to prove it," stormed Hugh. "No one else could have done it."

And Greenley quite agreed.

As he walked home, Hugh was very deep down in the dumps. What was he to say to Uncle Leonard? Need he say anything at all?

It was perfectly certain his uncle did not know exactly what clothes there were in the old chest, for he never went to look at them.

He would never *miss* anything.

It was a great temptation to sensitive Hugh. He hated and dreaded the idea of telling his uncle; he resented the prospect of receiving the whole of the blame. The others ought to have remembered, quite as much as he did. *They* ought to share the blame, too. Alas! Hugh was picturing the scene, and he could guess quite well what would happen when he told the Garrocks of this loss.

Donald would insist upon going up to the Court and telling Sir Leonard it was his fault, too. Stella would join in the confession,

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taking a share of blame. Leslie would loyally hang to brother and sister. Hugh's cheeks burned. How glad he was those three sturdy little friends could not know what had been passing through his mind! He would make haste and tell Uncle Leonard the truth, taking the full blame.

Hugh was now in as great a hurry to tell as, previously, he had been not to tell. The Garrocks were always so honest—almost fussily honest. They would have been horrified at the argument that Uncle Leonard would never find out.

And, having made his resolve, Hugh was also reflecting upon what Donald had said concerning Foxey Bob. Donald liked Bob, and by this time Hugh had come to think that Donald's opinions were worthy of great respect. Donald had been very friendly, and rather unusually coaxing, when he asked Hugh to try and think the best of Foxey Bob, and not condemn him unheard. Hugh felt hot. He had no right to tell Greenley, without real proof, that Foxey Bob had burned down their camp, and it would be up to him to prove his words—or, if possible, Bob's innocence.

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Sir Leonard put down his book when Hugh came into the library a little later.

“What’s the matter, my boy?” he asked.  
“Aren’t you well?”

Hugh changed from red to white, and plunged into his story breathlessly. A month ago he would scarcely have dared to come to his uncle with such a confession. And he was thinking hard of Donald, and Donald’s good opinion, as he concluded his story.

His uncle had always seemed such a far-off personage to the lonely boy that he was quite startled to find a hand resting kindly on his shoulder, while Sir Leonard drew him closer.

“That’s right, Hugh,” said the baronet. “I hate false excuses. You have owned up like a man. You had no business to forget a promise, but you have told me about it frankly. I forgive you in the same way. That ends the matter—now run off to bed.”

Hugh was delighted. It was not till later that he remembered Sir Leonard had forgotten to ask how Robin Hood’s camp came to be burned down.

But there was someone who did not forget to tell the baronet *his* version of the episode



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next morning. Greenley was triumphant at a chance of laying Foxey Bob by the heels. He knew that, even if he did not say so, Sir Leonard would be glad too, for the man of the waste lands was a constant annoyance to the owner of the Court.

Hugh, who knew that Greenley had reported the camp fire to Sir Leonard, was in such haste to be off in search of the now campless band of merry outlaws, that he nearly forgot a task he intended to perform first. This meant a second interview with his uncle. Sir Leonard was very busy this morning, and not at all inclined to talk to the boy. It cost the latter a great effort to speak up when he could see his listener's impatience to get on with his writing.

"Please, Uncle Leonard," he faltered, "I don't think—I mean, I know I ought not to have told Greenley that I knew Foxey Bob had set fire to our camp. I was in a temper, and I—I don't like Bob. I wanted to think he had done it, and would be punished."

"H'm!" said Sir Leonard, "we shall see all about Foxey Bob. It isn't only this fire he is answerable for. He's a poacher and

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wastrel who has been laughing up his sleeve at us for years. I am extremely glad that he has been caught at his tricks at last. As to your scruples, my boy, you need not let those worry you. A knife was picked up close to where the fire had been lighted, and we believe it was one of Foxey Bob's. No doubt the business was one of pure spite and mischief. I shall have the fellow arrested on suspicion, anyhow."

Hugh dared not say any more; perhaps at the back of his mind was that "serve-him-right" feeling we all know so well, though he was half sorry not to be able to take Donald the news that he had not only "given Foxey Bob a try," but saved him from punishment.

A very woebegone party of Robin Hood's men was already gathered by the Greenwood Tree when Hugh arrived.

"What *can* have happened?" asked Donald.

"Gipsies," said Leslie.

"And all our lovely things burned!" cried Stella tearfully.

They were quite excited over Hugh's story of last night's adventure, and Donald beamed

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on Hugh when he heard of that morning's interview with Sir Leonard.

"*I don't believe old Foxey did it,*" said Donald sturdily. "He likes us too much. Perhaps it was a spark from the Dutch-oven which got into some of the long, dead grass, and began to smoulder. If Foxey is arrested, I shall go up and see Sir Leonard."

"Well, it's no business of ours," Leslie affirmed. "The best thing we can do is to make another adventure out of it. News, comrades. Wind the horn to summon our doughty men to arms! The Sheriff of Nottingham has been here. We ride to capture him. Marry! so stout a knave——"

"Shut up!" said Hugh with vigour. "What do you really think of doing, Donald? It's simply not a bit of use for you to go up to my uncle. He would be angry with anyone for interfering."

Donald rubbed his nose with a comically worried air.

"I think I'll see Bob myself," he said; "then I shall know."

And without waiting to argue any further, he hurried off.

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“I say, Hugh,” said Stella anxiously, “you remembered to take those dresses back, didn’t you? They were the first things I thought of. You said you were not going to leave them in the camp.”

“I forgot,” replied Hugh shortly, “and—yes, they were burnt. I—I’ve told my uncle. Bother! I *do* wish Donald had not gone rushing off to see that old poacher. I can’t imagine why he should stand up for him as he does; I’m sure he’s a perfect rotter. Leslie, couldn’t you run after him and persuade him to come back? It’s not Donald’s job, and it will only end in a row.”

He did not quite like to add, “And serve him right, too!”

## CHAPTER VIII

### DONALD TO THE RESCUE

LESLIE obeyed reluctantly. He would much rather have stayed with Stella and Hugh. Donald would not listen to the message, either.

“I’m Bob’s friend,” he said, “and I’m going to help him. If he *did* burn down the camp it will be different. But I believe it is a mistake.”

Leslie whistled, but he knew better than to argue. He decided to accompany Donald to the hut.

However, when they reached Foxey Bob’s ramshackle dwelling the door was locked, and in spite of all their knocking no one answered.

“He can’t be in there,” yawned Leslie. “Perhaps he has gone into the woods, or——”

“He may have been arrested,” said Donald, his eyes twinkling, as they did when he was excited. “Oh, I hope he has not been taken to prison. And what would he do with Sam?”

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He wouldn't be allowed to keep a fox. Come on, Leslie. We must find out."

"Won't Hugh and Stella be wanting us?" asked Leslie. "We can't go and get Foxey out of prison if he's already in."

"He may not be right in yet," said Donald very determinedly. "I want to see him. If he says he didn't burn the camp I shall believe him."

"Where are you going?" asked Leslie, for Donald was tramping briskly over the waste ground back to the road.

"I'm going to see old Mat Wiggen, the road-mender," said Donald. "He is most likely at work just beyond the village; he told me yesterday that he was going to make a start there. He knows a good deal about Foxey Bob. He told me one day that he had known Foxey's mother, and she was nice. Perhaps Mat knows what has happened to him."

Leslie gave up any idea of getting back quickly to the woods and having games. Donald, he knew, would carry this job through to the end.

Luckily, Mat was already at his road mend-



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ing, or, rather, was sitting on a heap of stones munching bread and bacon and turnip. Leslie was quite tickled at the sight of the queer lunch. Fancy eating raw turnip! And Mat seemed to be enjoying it, too!

He looked quite pleased to see Donald, though he shook his head when the latter asked after Foxey. Donald had to speak very loudly, for Mat was hard of hearing.

"I seed Bob," said Mat, "but I dunno what he's been after. There's trouble about, and I'm sorry. Bob's not a bad 'un, for all they say. But there he was—with Greenley, the gamekeeper chap, and Larkins the p'leece-man, a-takin' him off between them. Bob looked black, he did, but I couldn speak to him. I did ask Charlie Dobbs, the butcher's lad, and he said Bob had been took up to the Court on a charge—but, bless you, *I* couldn hear what the charge was. It'll likely mean prison for Bob, though. Sir Leonard, he won't be lettin' him off light."

"It's about burning our camp in the wood," said Donald. "It was burnt late last night. Oh dear, I'm awfully sorry Bob has been taken up. Everyone seems to think he

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burned the camp, but I'm sure he didn't. I wanted to ask him."

Mat was curling his hand round his ear.

"Late last night?" he echoed. "Well now, what's that? Bob settin' fire to the woods last night? Why, that couldn't rightly be, laddie, for I was walkin' into Belton last night an' met Bob. We walked part of the way together, we did, and Bob, he told me he was spendin' the night with Granton, the blacksmith there. We both knowed Granton, an' spoke about him. That was no later than eight o'clock last night—so Bob couldn't have been doing no firing."

Donald nearly shouted in triumph! How surprised Mat was to have his hand shaken, as if Donald meant to wring it off!

"I'm going up to the Court," sang out Donald, joyously. "Come, Leslie; come along. We'll prove a what-d'you-call-it—an alibi. And Bob will be set free. I *knew* he never did it."

Leslie was almost as excited as his brother, and both boys set off at a run, leaving old Mat the road-mender looking after them with a smile on his wrinkled face.

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So Foxey Bob had found friends to speak up for him. That was all right—and Mat went back contentedly to his job.

The butler at the Court looked very surprised when two hatless, breathless boys appeared at the door demanding to see Sir Leonard. The baronet was busy, he declared, but Donald would take no refusal.

“We’ve come to help him in his business,” he said anxiously, “if it is about Foxey Bob. We *must* see him—or he might be sending Bob off to prison by mistake.”

So the butler had to take the message, and came back to say Sir Leonard would see the young gentlemen in his office.

Such a bare, dismal room that was, almost like a room in a police station. And there was Sir Leonard, seated in his big chair, with Bob standing opposite between Greenley and the policeman. Bob looked very sullen, and had a dreadful scowl on his face which did not change even when he saw his boy friend.

Donald gave him a smile and walked up to Sir Leonard’s chair.

“Bob couldn’t have fired the camp last night, sir,” he said eagerly. “Old Mat says

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he couldn't. Mat walked part of the way into Belton with him, and Bob spent the whole night with Granton, the blacksmith."

Sir Leonard frowned, while Foxey Bob gave a croaking laugh of defiance.

"Same as I told you, squire," he said, "but you wouldn't listen. Send into Belton and fetch Granton along. He and Mat will tell you what I was doing last night. You can't charge me with setting fire to the camp when I can prove I wasn't anywhere near it."

Sir Leonard did not look at all pleased. Perhaps he thought Donald an interfering boy, but he could not say so. Foxey Bob had a right to defend himself, and Sir Leonard, ringing a bell, gave instructions for someone to go over to Belton and fetch the blacksmith.

Donald walked across and held out his hand to Bob.

"I knew you wouldn't set our camp on fire," he said cheerily. "I'm jolly glad I met Mat. And we're all frightfully pleased it has been proved you are innocent."

Bob's scowl faded away, and, though he flushed up to the eyes, he gripped Donald's hand till he made it tingle. The boy's eager

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championship had touched the man's heart deeply. But he would not let those others see it. Defiant and sturdy he stood there waiting, and rather to Leslie's vexation Donald insisted on staying, too. Sir Leonard went out of the room, but he came back later. He took no notice of the boys, and Donald was quite perplexed to see how vexed he seemed with them. Surely Hugh's uncle could not want Bob to go to prison if he were innocent? And Bob *was* innocent! The burly blacksmith from Belton proved that, for he brought someone else who had been with them in the forge last night, chatting till nearly midnight.

Greenley and the policeman had to give up their prisoner when all the story had been told, though Sir Leonard, in dismissing Bob, said some very harsh things—at least, so Donald thought.

It seemed very unjust, and Donald flushed red with indignation as he heard Sir Leonard warn Foxey Bob that he would not get off so easily next time, and that he was by no means satisfied, yet, that he was not at the bottom of the mischief.

So, after all, Sir Leonard still believed Bob

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to be guilty ! That made Donald all the more eager a champion, and, as Bob passed out of the room with the blacksmith, the boy moved forward and caught his arm.

“Good luck, Bob !” he said. “I knew you would never have done it.” And Foxey Bob’s dark face actually relaxed into a smile as he thanked him.

Meantime, while Donald and Leslie were busy championing a black sheep’s cause, Stella had been left with Hugh to wander round the desolate camp. Hugh had seemed quite grumpy when Leslie did not return with Donald.

Stella felt decidedly depressed.

“We were going to have such a lovely day,” she sighed, “and now it has ended in this. Only, Hugh, don’t let us make it worse by squabbling. If Bob didn’t burn the camp he’ll say so, and be able to prove it. Then we can try to find out who did do it. When Donald comes back, don’t you think Leslie’s idea best—to go on playing, as Robin Hood would have done if his camp had been destroyed ?”

“He’d have paid out his enemies,” said



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Hugh, "but, of course, Donald wouldn't do that, as the enemy is a friend of his."

"The real Robin Hood would have made sure first which enemy did it," said Stella "That's what Donald will want to prove, and it will be much more fun to make a game of it."

Hugh was beginning to yield. At first he had felt in the mood for a fresh quarrel with Donald. He had rather patted himself on the back for having confessed his carelessness to his uncle, and had expected nothing but praise from his friends and general condemnation of Foxey Bob.

If Donald had turned to him and said "You were right, after all, about the chap being no good," Hugh would have been quite pleased—and quite ready to be generous in hoping that Bob would not be punished severely.

But Stella had a cheery way of looking at their loss, after the first shock was over; and it was quite true that the destruction of the camp made the persecution of outlaws seem more real.

"We might go in search of a new camp-

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ing place," added Stella. "Leslie says there is a kind of cave near that chalky ridge. I can't quite explain, but it's like a wall with a zig-zaggy path leading up to the common."

Hugh nodded.

"Witches' Hollow," he replied. "I *did* think of it the other day, and wonder what use we could make of it. And there are still lots of old rubbishy things in the Court attics which we could have for a new camp. You *do* know how to play, Stella. I should have given up altogether."

Stella cheered up immensely at that. At first everything had looked so terribly black and disappointing, but now fresh enthusiasm was kindling. It would be such a surprise, too, to Donald and Leslie, to find that they had planned a fine new scheme.

"We might go back to the Court," she said eagerly, "and fetch some of the things now, for a beginning. I've got Leslie's bugle or horn, whichever it is—*that* hasn't been burnt, anyway. Come along."

Hugh was only too willing. This was far better than standing grumbling over a heap

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of ashes. He took Stella's hand and the two raced back by a short cut.

The Court attics were, of course, very much larger than those of the Lodge, and Hugh had been given leave to take anything he liked, within reason. Stella pounced on an old blue curtain to fix up over the cave entrance, and Hugh unearthed a chair, and three shelves fastened together into a kind of bookcase.

Donald and Leslie were nowhere to be seen, when the others passed the old camp, and Hugh and Stella were not sorry to carry out their new plan alone. There was so much they could do, and the Witches' Hollow began to look quite cosy by the time Leslie's owl cry rang out.

"Leslie learned to do that when he belonged to the Wolf Cubs," said Stella. "I can't answer very well. So let's shout 'Hi!' together."

"It doesn't sound very much like Maid Marion," laughed Hugh, all the clouds now vanished from his face.

Donald and Leslie were quite astounded to find what their "comrades true" had been doing. Donald had been half afraid that Hugh

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would go off in a grumpy mood because he had taken Foxey Bob's part; and he was sorry when Stella asked a question almost in the same breath as that in which she told of the new camp, and how the Robin Hood game was to go on, after all.

"Did Bob burn the camp?" she inquired, "and what did you say to him?"

Donald looked at Hugh.

"Foxey Bob wasn't in his hut," he said. "Greenley and the policeman had taken him up to Sir Leonard's. I think they wanted to put him in prison, but they couldn't, for someone told us Foxey had been seen over at Belton late last night and—and, well, Sir Leonard had to send over to a blacksmith there, and he said Foxey Bob had spent that night with him. Sir Leonard sent Bob away, but he seemed very angry and told him he still believed he was at the bottom of the mischief. Sir Leonard wasn't pleased with us for helping. But I'm glad we did."

Hugh got very red in the face, but he did not answer as he would have done a week ago. He did not want to quarrel again with Donald; and he began to see that if Donald were

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right and Foxey Bob innocent, he, Donald had acted very kindly.

“I’m glad, too,” said Stella, “and we’ve all agreed to make it a part of the Robin Hood game. *You* are Robin Hood now, Donald, so you must give us our orders. We know the King’s foresters have destroyed all our belongings, but we don’t know all their names yet. We can call Foxey Bob Squat Jock, and—well, I don’t know yet that we suspect anyone else.”

Leslie patted his sister on the back.

“You’re the best Maid Marion going,” he praised, “and even in history she was quite as clever as Robin. Now, Don—Robin Hood, what are your orders?”

Donald sat on a boulder with his thinking cap on.

“They say Squat Jock dropped his knife near the Greenwood Tree,” he said seriously, “but *we* know he might have done that when we were entertaining him. Away, my merrie men, we must search every blade of grass and nook in the glade. Afterwards a council will be held in the Witches’ Hollow, which in future shall be known as Robin’s Nook.”

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And away tramped the band, as merry as though no disaster had overtaken them, or as if it were almost worth while having had the disaster for the joy of setting to work with fresh vigour to make everything good—or better—again.



## CHAPTER IX

### A CAPTURE AND A CONFESSION

THE searching for clues around Maid Marion's bower and the original Greenwood Tree proved in vain, and with ardour somewhat damped the Robin Hood band returned home.

"I shan't be able to come out with you this afternoon," sighed Hugh. "I have to ride over to Wroxleigh with Uncle Leonard, to see one of my aunts. I *do* hate it. I used to hate it even before I knew all of you, but it will be worse now. Aunt Elinor is as stiff as if she had swallowed a poker, and she never thinks of anything but manners."

Leslie chuckled.

"What *would* she think of us?" he replied. "Hard luck, Hugh! I'm glad Aunt Nance isn't like that. She's so nice, and busy, and bustling. She has jobs for every bit of the day, and she leaves us to *our* jobs. That's the best sort of aunt."

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"Everyone at Clinton Lodge is nice," said Stella, "except Robbie, the gardener. I really believe he dislikes us—not because we are *us*, but because we are children. He says children and puppies and sparrows ought to live on a desert island till they are grown up. He dislikes Leslie more than any of us, because he feeds the sparrows."

Hugh laughed and ran off home to the Court, wondering what new plans would be made to-morrow for the Robin Hood game. He did not expect to enjoy his afternoon, because he could guess very well that Uncle Leonard would not be in a good temper.

Sir Leonard, like plenty of other people, did not like being thwarted—especially by a handful of youngsters—and if Donald and Leslie had not come to Foxey Bob's assistance that morning, there would have been no one to bring that alibi forward, to prove that the prisoner had spent the night in a town three miles off. Foxey Bob, in his sullen way, would probably not have pressed the matter if left to himself.

Sir Leonard seemed very anxious indeed to have Foxey Bob safe in jail. Why was it?

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But we will leave Hugh to spend his dull afternoon with very dull relations, and follow the three young Garrocks home to dinner.

Aunt Nance had put the meal off till two o'clock, as she would be out, so there was no hurry, and the three loitered along the lane eagerly discussing the events of that busy morning.

Donald would not be happy, of course, till Foxey Bob's innocence was *quite* proved. However, he rather enjoyed following up a clue, or unravelling a mystery. He was such a steady old one-idea plodder, that if Stella had not brought Bob into the game of Robin Hood there might have been an end to play for Donald—at least, until he had solved the camp fire mystery.

"I shall go and see Greenley this afternoon," Donald was saying, as they walked along, "and ask if he suspects anyone else, now we know it was not Foxey——" He only got as far as that before an interruption came, in startling fashion.

Crack! Squeal! It was difficult to tell which had come first—squeal or crack. But

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both were loud enough to bring the three children to a standstill.

“Look!” gasped Stella. “Oh, he will fall!”

Leslie spluttered. He did not want to be unkind enough to smile, but the sight above him nearly made him laugh outright.

A big tree grew by the side of the lane—in fact, lots of big trees, all in a line—with boughs stretching over the lane in one direction, and out over a wheat-field in the other. And from a bough, very high above their heads, dangled a small, shock-haired boy, hooked up by the seat of his corduroy trousers.

He *did* look funny. That was quite true, for his hair stuck out like bristles above his red full-moon face, while his pale blue eyes were wide as saucers.

“*O—er—ow!*” howled the boy. “I wull be killed.”

“It’s Billy,” sang Leslie. “You know—Billy; Roger’s brother.”

“*Oow—yow!*” roared Roger’s brother. “H-help!”

Crack! went the bough again.

## A CAPTURE AND A CONFESSION

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Stella clasped her hands.

"He really will be killed if he falls," she cried; and at this confirmation of his fears Billy's howls were redoubled.

Donald was beginning to swarm up the tree. It was not at all an easy one to climb, and if Billy's bough did break he might easily swing down and fall upon his rescuer.

"Don't, Donald!" pleaded Stella.

"His trousers *must* be tough," said Leslie.

Donald went about his task in the placid, stolid way in which he did most things.

Crack! went the bough again.

Billie howled in smothered anguish.

"I did it," he moaned, "I won't say n'otherwise. I did it."

No one took any notice. Stella and Leslie were squeezing hands in excitement. Donald was now standing on a bough which did not look either thick or strong enough for his weight. He was balancing himself unsteadily, with Billy hanging over his head like a pudding on the nail of a larder shelf.

If Donald fell—— Stella shut her eyes.

"He's—all right," jerked Leslie, who was

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wishing there was room for two on that branch. "Look, Stella. No—don't, if you'd rather not."

Leslie himself was gaping up at the tree, his mouth open like a young bird. Donald had seated himself on his perch and was stretching upwards. Could he reach that tiresome spike of wood which kept Billy prisoner?

Ah! just in time; for those trousers had done their utmost to prove the stoutness of their make, and now, with a swish of tearing material, Billy was free—free to fall headlong, or be caught in those sturdy arms outstretched to grab him.

No wonder Stella hid her face on Leslie's shoulder. No wonder Leslie himself drew in his breath sharply, for it seemed impossible that Donald could hold on to that limp figure, which hung—luckily—as a dead weight on his free arm. To and fro the would-be rescuer swayed, so nearly overbalancing that it seemed certain that he must topple—Billy and all. It was country-bred Billy who really saved the situation, however, for, as Donald swung outwards from the bough, he stretched up his own grimy fist, and clutched a spur



## A CAPTURE AND A CONFESSION

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of wood which stuck out from the trunk where a limb had been wrenched off in a gale.

Donald could release his hold now, for Billy had swung his feet forward, had curled his legs round the trunk, and was clinging like a wild cat. He was safe, and, nimble as any squirrel, he swarmed down to the ground. Donald followed. He was very stiff, and his arms were feeling as if someone had been pulling them out of their sockets. But he only flushed very red when Stella flung her arms about him, in the joy of seeing him safe.

"I'm all right," he said gruffly, "don't fuss, old girl. Here, you Billy, what's wrong? You didn't—well! you *couldn't* have hurt yourself much, or you wouldn't have got down the tree like that."

The attention of all three was diverted to the "victim" of the adventure, for Billy had seated himself on the bank, his knuckles screwed into his eyes.

"I did it," he sobbed. "Roger, he—he'll pitch into me—he said he would. I—I—it——"

"Shall I fetch Roger?" asked Leslie.

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"We'll beg you off. If he promised us *not* to pitch into you, he wouldn't. He's a sport."

Billie blinked at the speaker, then groaned. He was evidently not quite happy in his mind about something.

"Why were you climbing the tree?" asked Stella. "Were you getting birds' eggs, and is that what Roger would be angry about?"

"No," said Billie, blurting all the tale out in a rush of words. "I was hiding up the tree 'cos Roger said he'd wallop me if I didn't tell the truth about Robing Hood. He arst me, an' I just shuts my mouth, I did. I knew Roger'd wallop me if I told the truth, and he said he would if I didn't; now I'll tell it, anyways. It was me set light to that there tent in the wood."

Billie's questioners had, at the moment, forgotten all about Robin Hood's camp. And this confession so surprised them that they could not speak.

It was lucky that they could not! Billie would *never* have been able to answer all the questions they might have fired off at him.

## A CAPTURE AND A CONFESSION

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As it was, he went ahead with his tale in his own sweet way.

“Roger, he told us at home all about Robing Hood, an’ the feathers, an’ the camp, an’ the feastin’,” he said, “and I was ’mazin’ anxious to see it all. Roger wouldn’t have taken me. He’d have said it was pryin’ an’ that the wood was private. So I up an’ went alone. I took a candle an’ a box of matches, so that I could look inside the tent. There was a bit of a wind blowin’ an’ the moon hadn’t come out. So I stands close to the tent an’ lights up. Then, something flapped agin the candle, an’ the candle flapped agin something, an’ all the blaze come. I *was* scared. I dursen’ try an’ stop the flare. I didn’t think to do it at first, an’ then it were too late. So off I went ; I ran right out of the woods an’ home. At the top of the hill I waits a minute, an’ there I sees the smoke a-billowin’ out. So off I goes again and hides me head under the bed-clothes.

“I s’pose Roger must ’ave smelt the smoke on me coat, though, for when I went up to the Lodge at breakfus’-time, he arsts me if I knew about the burnin’ of the Robing

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Hood camp. He was angry an' worried like—an' I was frightened. I said *no*—and then I thinks of Ananias, an' says I didn't know an' couldn't say. That was later—and he says he'd wallop me if I didn't tell the truth. So I run away. I thought he'd be followin', as it was dinner-time, so I ups into the tree, and then—I slips with my foot an'—an'—would have been smashed all up if Master Donald hadn't saved me. *Boo—hoo—*”

As Billie ended his confession with a truly grief-stricken howl, who should come into view but—brother Roger himself!

Donald looked at Leslie and Stella.

So Foxey Bob's innocence was quite proved! It was no one's revenge, but an accident. The “tracking of the guilty foresters” was over. Here was the culprit, self-confessed, sobbing his heart out in fear of punishment.

“I think,” said Donald slowly, “you ought to tell Sir Leonard at once, because I'm sure he still thinks Foxey Bob is at the bottom of the trouble. But if you like, Billie, I'll come with you up to the Court and tell Sir Leonard just how it happened. As far as Stella and

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Leslie and I are concerned, we'll forgive you, won't we ? ”

“ Of course we will,” said Stella. “ I know what an awfully wobbly feeling it gives one to have to own up to a thing like that. And it was an accident—quite. Shall we all go to the Court ? ”

But Donald thought it would be better if he and Billie went alone, leaving Stella to explain matters to Roger. Stella was in such a hurry to do this, though, that she and Leslie had the tale all told before Donald and Billie had time to reach the end of the lane.

Poor Roger was in a terrible state of mind, but he was very loyal.

“ I'll go up along of the little chap, too,” he said gravely. “ It would mos' b—break mother's heart if our Billie got into trouble with Sir Leonard.”

And though Stella and Leslie felt quite certain Sir Leonard was much too nice and kind to make much trouble over what was, after all, an accident, Roger set off at a run, soon overtaking the other two.

Leslie sighed.

“ It seems,” he said, “ that there's nothing

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left for me to do but to go back to dinner. Aunt Nance made that one of her rules—to be punctual for meals, and it would hurt Eliza's feelings dreadfully, too, if we should help to overboil her leg of mutton—and dumplings ! ”



## CHAPTER X

### AN AFTERNOON'S SPORT

**S**IR LEONARD looked very surprised at sight of his three visitors. He did not appear to be too pleased, either.

"I haven't much time to spare, Donald," he said, looking at his watch. "Hugh and I are leaving at two o'clock to pay a visit. Who are these lads, and what do they want?"

Billie shuffled with his feet and looked ready to cry. He was in the greatest awe of Sir Leonard, and would never, never have got that story out if he had come alone.

But Donald was so eager to clear Foxey Bob that he had no difficulty in giving an explanation.

"I had to come at once, though Hugh did tell us you were going out, sir," he replied; "but it is about the camp fire. It was—well, really a sort of accident. Billie did it. He wanted to see the camp, and lit a candle. The wind blew the blanket against the flame,

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and when everything blazed, he was scared and ran away. He's very sorry."

Sir Leonard was frowning in what Billie thought quite a terrible way, though, as a matter of fact, he was not thinking of Billie at all. You see, Sir Leonard had *quite* made up his mind that Foxey Bob had something to do with that fire, and he had meant to go on trying to prove it, in spite of the alibi and Donald's interference. There is an old proverb which says "give a dog a bad name and hang him." Sir Leonard had given Foxey Bob a *very* bad name, indeed. But he was far too just to want anyone to be punished wrongly.

"I shall not punish you," he told Billie, "but I shall write to your father and tell him you deserve it. You knew you were trespassing in my woods, and that you had no right to light that candle. Had it been summer-time a very terrible fire might have been the result. Even as it was, enough damage was done. And it was cowardly to run away afterwards."

Tears rolled down Billie's cheeks. He was very frightened, poor boy. Sir Leonard was

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so stern and angry, and oh ! what a thrashing he would get from his father !

Then Roger spoke up.

"If you please, Sir Leonard," he pleaded, "if you could forgive the little 'un we'd be very grateful. Dad'll be angry enough now and if you write it'll be worse still. It'll make a deal of trouble for mother."

"Yes, do please forgive him," added Donald. "I think it must have been pretty awful for him to have known that someone else nearly had to go to prison for what he'd done."

"I'd have had to run away," whimpered Billie. "Oh, I wishes I'd never gone a-near the wood. I'll never, never want to go again. If only dad don't have to know."

"And mother will be worritted to death," said Roger.

Sir Leonard was getting over his irritation. He was really a kind-hearted man, and he realized that this small boy had had a fright he would probably never forget. So instead of writing to Billie's father he gave the little lad a quiet lecture, and received eager promises never, never to go trespassing, or striking matches "for fun" again.

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Donald lingered for a few seconds after the two boys had gone out of the library.

"And may I tell Foxey Bob how sorry you are he was arrested by mistake?" he asked eagerly.

But again Sir Leonard's face grew stern.

"There is no need for you to have anything to do or say to Foxey Bob," he retorted. "You need not think he is a persecuted hero, my boy. That's quite a mistake. Foxey Bob is a bad fellow, who deserves prison over and over again. One day I shall be able to lay my hand on him and he will get his deserts. In any case, he's not a fit companion for a boy. Now—off you go."

Donald was disappointed. He did not think Sir Leonard was a bit fair about Foxey Bob, though he had not dared to say so. Why was it that Hugh and his uncle hated that fellow so much?

Roger and Billie were waiting outside the gate to thank their champion. Billie was quite tearful again, and most anxious to know if there weren't any jobs Master Donald wanted done?

Donald shook his head.

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“Not at present,” he replied, “but there might be later on. You never know. I’m going home now. Then I shall go and see Foxey Bob. I say, Roger, *why* is it Sir Leonard dislikes Bob so much?”

Roger looked very wise.

“They do say it was about what happened years and years ago,” he said. “Sir Leonard always had the idea that, somehow, Foxey had a hand in his little son’s disappearance. Of course, he couldn’t have had; he wasn’t in the place. But that’s the tale that’s always told, and Foxey Bob do hate Sir Leonard proper, same as Sir Leonard would hate him if he weren’t a grand gentleman.”

That gave Donald food for thought as he hurried home. Of course, he was late for dinner, but he did not mind that, and Aunt Nance had sent his plate of mutton to be kept hot. She was pleased to hear that Sir Leonard had forgiven Billie. Donald was almost in too great a hurry to eat his dinner. He was so anxious to go off and tell Bob that his name was quite cleared.

Leslie and Stella had been wondering what they could do with themselves this afternoon.

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Leslie had all sorts of plans and finally decided to go exploring, but they agreed to wait for Donald, who insisted on going off at once to see Foxey Bob.

“He may be thinking he’s likely to be arrested again,” said Donald. “He’ll be jolly relieved to know the real culprit has been found.”

The finding of Bob was not so easy as Donald had expected it to be. He was not in his hut, and Donald might have had a vain search had he not heard the crack of a gun, fired so near that the boy gave quite a jump and a shout. At the same time there was a sudden whirring of wings, and a big brown bird rose from the ground and flew away down the glade.

“Hey!” gasped a voice—and there was Bob, gun in hand, looking quite scared.

“I didn’t touch you, eh?” he asked anxiously. “My! When you hollered out I was fair frightened.”

“*Did* I holler?” asked Donald, half ashamed. “I was awfully startled, you see. I didn’t know anyone with a gun was here. Were you——”



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"Yes," said Bob defiantly, "I was trying to bring down one of the Squire's birds—and I'd have had him if you hadn't come along. As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. Sir Leonard, he means to lay me by the heels—and so I'll have my fling first. It's *his* doing."

Donald went very red. He was sorry Bob felt like that, though in a way he could understand it.

"I came to find you," he explained. "It was Billie—one of the boys in the village—who set the camp on fire by accident. Sir Leonard has been told, so he couldn't want to lay you by the heels, not for that, anyway. I came to tell you, and—I hope it will make you feel happier, you know, and all that. *We* don't mind a bit about the camp being burnt, now."

Foxy Bob listened with a very queer look on his face. This boy, with his slow, quiet ways and sturdy loyalty, was a new experience for Bob. He had no desire to call Sir Leonard any hard names, now, though he could not exactly say he was feeling happier.

"Hugh and Sir Leonard have gone on a visit to Hugh's aunt," went on Donald, wishing

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he could have brought some sort of an apology from Sir Leonard, "and we are going exploring. Would you like to come, too?"

He had only just had that bright idea, and was quite eager about it. Foxey Bob grinned.

"Well, that's all right," said he. "Maybe I *would* like to, only I'd best put away me gun first."

Donald nodded. He was pleased Bob was coming—and that he seemed more cheerful. He had looked so black and angry at first.

Leslie and Stella were pleased, too, to see whom Donald had brought with him. Still, they thought, it was as well that Hugh was not there, after all.

"What shall we do?" asked Leslie. "We would like to explore, Bob. Do you know of any exciting places round here?"

"There are the Wenford Falls," added Stella, "where those lovely ferns grow—the hart's-tongue ones. Aunt Nance said we were not to go near the river without a grown-up being with us, but now you're here, that will be all right."

It was quite a merry little party which set off together, and Foxey seemed to know such a

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lot of things about woods and ferns and flowers. What a pity that people thought him such a horrid man! The young Garrocks soon found him the best of comrades.

And hurrah for Wenford Falls! Not only were there splendid ferns to be secured for the rockery at home, but there was the added joy of scrambling over the slippery rocks to get them. They ought to have brought trowels, but Bob showed them the way to "lift" the delicate roots with their knives, so that they were not damaged.

"I must get that little beauty growing amongst the moss over there," Leslie said to Stella, as he balanced amid-stream, below the falls. Donald and Bob were climbing high above them, but Leslie had preferred to stay with his sister.

"You'll fall if you do," she declared. "Don't be silly, Les! There are heaps of ferns without risking a ducking, and the water is deep down there."

But Leslie only laughed. He loved scrambling about in difficult places, and made a daring jump from one rock to the other.

Alas! pride has a fall only too often, and

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this time the fall was a very unpleasant one. Down went Leslie on his back, having slipped on the wet moss, and the next moment he had rolled over into deep water.

Stella screamed for help, and Foxey Bob, who had seen the accident, came springing down over the rocks to the rescue. And at that moment Greenley and one of the under-keepers came into sight above them.

Greenley had been almost as angry as Sir Leonard that his enemy, the poacher, had slipped through his fingers, and when, a few minutes ago, he had spied Bob's fur cap rising from behind the rocks, he had come creeping up hoping to catch him red-handed at "tickling" trout.

Instead, there was Bob, soaking wet, with a dripping youngster in his arms.

Greenley shouted, whilst Bob, who very easily guessed what was the reason of the keeper's sudden appearance, grinned sourly.

The keeper began talking angrily to Foxey Bob, telling him he had no business there and warning him that he would catch him at his poaching yet.

Bob's cheeriness had quite vanished again.

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He had forgotten for an hour or so that he was just a black sheep, and was angry with Greenley for reminding him. Donald was vexed, too, but the sight of the shivering Leslie made him forget Foxey Bob's wrongs.

Stella, too, was in a worried state of mind about Leslie, whose teeth were chattering and who looked rather white.

"You'll catch a dreadful cold," she said, "and it is a long way home. Bob, do you know of a cottage where Leslie could get his clothes dried?"

"There's Grannie Eldon at the Corner Cottage," said Bob. "She's a good old 'un, is grannie, and she'd be glad to give the little lad's clothes a drying. Come along, and I'll show you."

The Corner Cottage was quite close, and after pointing it out Foxey Bob slipped away, saying he reckoned it was time for him to go home.

"You must come out ferning with us again," said Stella gratefully, after they had all thanked him again for helping Leslie out of the stream. But Donald did not add his voice to the invitation; for, of course, Hugh would be with

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them to-morrow, and if Hugh were horrid to Bob there would be a quarrel—and Donald did not wish that.

Grannie Eldon was an apple-cheeked, white-haired old lady, who was quite pleased to help Leslie strip off his wet things and carry them away to dry by the kitchen fire, while he sat rolled up in a blanket.

“Was that Foxey Bob with you, dearies?” asked grannie, as she peeped from the window. “Well, well, it’s time and time since I’ve seen the poor fellow. How he has altered, to be sure—and not for the better, either.”

“Have you known Bob long?” asked Donald eagerly. He liked this quaint old woman, who was the very picture of a “grannie,” with her white hair and spectacles. “He—he’s a friend of ours. He’s been helping us get ferns.”

Grannie was standing at a cupboard, tiptoeing to reach down a plate of gingerbread; for, of course, she knew that after scrambling about among the woods and rocks, and a rather watery adventure, those bairns must be hungry!

“Dearie me! Known Bob long? Why,



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sure," said grannie. "I've known Bob all his life, so to speak, and a fine merry boy he was, too, full of his pranks, but no harm in him. It was bad friends and love of sport and daring led Bob wrong. But I was grieved for his little wife, and for Bob, too, when he went to prison. It was a sad business—and sorrow for more than Bob to follow. But there, you eat that gingerbread, dearies, and tell me how you like it."

The three visitors were *quite* ready to eat gingerbread, but they wanted to hear more of Bob and his history. Grannie Eldon had lots of stories to tell them, but when Donald asked why it was Sir Leonard did not like Bob, she shook her head.

"There's always been tales," said she, "and Bob's wife—why, I was with her when she died. Her brother Mark was there, too. Well, well, I wouldn't wish to say more, dearies, but—of course, when people speak wild about vengeance, it sets tongues wagging and folk thinking. And now, I'll be getting you all a cup o' tea before you go, for there's nothing like it to keep a cold chill away after a wetting."

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Evidently Grannie Eldon did not want to talk any more about Foxey Bob; but Donald, for one, was puzzling over the old woman's words as the three walked home after the afternoon's adventures.

It was Stella who most loudly lamented having left the ferns behind at Wenford Falls !

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SMUGGLERS' CAVES

**I**N spite of Leslie's assurance that he *never* caught cold, Aunt Nance insisted on taking one of those tiresome stitches in time when she heard about the ducking in the rivers. So next day, to Leslie's disgust, he was told he had better stay indoors, at any rate during the morning, till his aunt made sure he was not going to develop a "tickly throat" or begin sneezing.

"I'm glad mother doesn't molly-coddle us like that," said Leslie to Stella, who was very sympathetic, and promised to remain indoor with "the invalid who was not an invalid"! After all, as she cheerily pointed out, there were *lots* of jolly ways of spending a morning, even indoors.

"What ways?" asked Leslie gloomily, but he brightened up when Stella made several really good suggestions about taking tools up

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to the attic and making a table and other odds and ends for the new camp.

“Aunt might let us have a late tea to-day,” added Stella, “and then we could make an exploration this afternoon right through the woods as far as the Ridge. It would be better than pottering about round the camp; you would be less likely to catch——”

“I forbid you to say the word,” said Leslie severely. “I’ve not got a ——”

Then they both laughed.

Donald would have been quite willing to stay indoors with the others, but he knew Hugh would be waiting, so off he went alone, and, sure enough, there sat Hugh on a tree-stump in front of the camp. But it did not take Donald two minutes to see that something was wrong. Hugh was in a bad temper.

Donald sighed. He hated “grumps,” and when he or the others had an attack of them, they took good care to laugh it away. Hugh’s attack must have been a very bad one, judging by the cloud on his face. But Donald wisely took no notice.

“Did you have a good time yesterday?”

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he asked. "We went ferning at Wenford Falls. We got some jolly ferns, too; but Leslie fell in the river, and in the excitement we left them behind. Aunt Nance is afraid Leslie may have taken cold; so this morning he and Stella are staying indoors. They are making an A1 table for the camp."

Hugh did not seem interested. He kept picking up pebbles and throwing them very hard at the trunk of a tree.

"Anything the matter?" asked Donald. "Got toothache?"

Toothache was a pain which he felt made a crotchety temper quite excusable.

But Hugh had not got toothache, and he did not like being asked the question even though he *had* wanted Donald to see he was in a bad temper.

"I'm furious," he confessed. "Poor old Ringo, the best friend I have in the world, has had his foot caught in a trap. He won't be able to walk properly for days, and poisoning may set in. Of course, it's that brute of a poacher you're so fond of."

Donald whistled.

"I'm awfully sorry about Ringo," he said.

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"He's such a sport. Have you washed his paw with Condyl's fluid? It's very good."

"I've done everything," snapped Hugh, whose grief about his pet had put him in a very quarrelsome mood; "but—but if Ringo dies—well, anyhow, I mean to make things hot for Foxey Bob."

Donald thrust his hands deep into his pockets and planted his feet squarely. He did not answer at once, and when he did it was in his usual slow fashion.

"You don't know that Foxey Bob set the trap," he argued. "Lots of traps are set by all sorts of people. The keeper told me so. Foxey Bob's own Sammy was caught in a trap."

Hugh aimed another pebble quite viciously at that tree.

"Of course it was Foxey Bob," he said aggressively. "I'm sure of it. Anyway, he does set traps. He's a poacher, and a bad lot. My uncle would be only too glad if he were packed off to prison. I wish I could help to send him there."

Donald looked towards the camp. He had two minds about walking quietly off and starting work by himself. Hugh would be better



## THE SMUGGLERS' CAVES

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company when he had recovered from his bad temper. But Foxey Bob was Donald's friend, and one must say something to defend a friend when he is probably falsely accused. Donald had been as pleased as could be when Bob thanked him for clearing his character about the burning of the camp. Poor old Bob—who had no one to say a good word for him, no one to take his part!

"It's not sporting to talk like that," he said quietly; "it's not even fair. You would hate to be called spiteful, Hugh, but what you said just now *was* spiteful. I'm sorry about Ringo, but I think it's rotten of you to talk about imprisoning someone without knowing for certain that he was the cause of the accident."

Hugh flushed angrily. "I don't care what *you* think," he retorted. "You can't lay down the law to *me*. You—you're a perfect idiot about that poacher. I can tell you, if you want to take sides with him, you'd better have him for your chum altogether—and I'll go."

Donald picked up a stick and began peeling it. "We are going to have an exploration this afternoon," he said, "as far as the Ridge. Stella and Leslie are coming. You'll come too,

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and—we won't quarrel. It's such *rot*—isn't it? Because afterwards we should both be sorry."

Hugh shrugged his shoulders. "It's all very well to change the conversation," he said, "but I shall do as I say about Foxey Bob, and if you're such an idiot as to take his part, you'd better make a chum of him. *I'm* not going to join in."

"Just as you like," said Donald—and this time he did walk off to the camp. If he had stayed he might have lost his temper as well, and Donald was one of those slow folk who experience more difficulty than some to find their tempers again after losing them.

Hugh watched the sturdy figure of his chum, and frowned. He liked Donald much the best of the three children now, although he had liked him least of all at first. He valued his good opinion, and if he had not been in a bad temper he would have been able to see that Donald was quite right in his argument about Foxey Bob. Indeed, when Hugh came to think of it, the trap which had caught Ringo had been set in quite the farthest corner of the wood from Bob's hut.

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But Hugh was not going to part with his bad temper all at once. He sat for some time on the stump, still throwing pebbles, and telling himself that unless Donald apologized he would not be friends with him. Altogether, Hugh spent a thoroughly dull and miserable half-hour, and finally got up, with his shoulders hunched about his ears, to wander back home.

To his surprise—and secretly to his relief—he heard Donald halloing after him quite cheerily.

“We shall all be at the camp at two o’clock,” he called. “Be sure you come. We’re going to explore the Ridge.”

Hugh hesitated, half inclined to forget his bad temper and reply cheerfully. It was quite decent of Donald to hold out the olive branch, and after consideration Hugh came back up the path.

“We might go down into the caves,” he said. “If we start at two and take our tea, we should have lots of time to get back before dark.”

It sounded tempting, but Donald regretfully shook his head.

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“We’d better stick to the Ridge,” he said. “Of course, I’d like awfully to go down into the caves, but they’re usually damp and cold, and as Leslie has nearly caught a chill, Aunt Nance might not like him to go. Another thing, old Robbie was telling me that parts of those caves aren’t safe. Leslie is as keen as mustard to go down, but I’m sure we’d better wait till a grown-up can go with us too. The Ridge will be very good fun.”

It is easy to pile our grumbles high when we are out-at-elbow with other folk, and Hugh was piling his quite briskly. Donald *never* acted upon other people’s suggestions, he told himself; he always wanted to rule everyone, and he was as obstinate as—as a pig, about Foxey Bob. Stella and Leslie had much more go in them, and, if Donald had been as keen on caves as his brother, he could have gone down to Shingleton Caves without choosing to remember Robbie’s nonsense. What a coward Donald must be to trouble about a place being not quite safe!

These were some of Hugh’s grumbles, and by the time he reached home he was again feeling very unfriendly indeed towards Donald, and

## THE SMUGGLERS' CAVES

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more than half inclined not to go to the meeting-place at all.

It was a pity Hugh could not laugh at himself just then, and try to realize that he had been actually seeing how he could best rub his own temper up the wrong way.

But when he entered the dining-room at the Court and found that Aunt Nellie and her big daughter Kathleen had come to lunch, he quickly decided to keep tryst with the Garrocks.

Kathleen was sixteen and so horribly grown-up and patronizing. She loved to talk as though Hugh were quite a small boy, and sometimes annoyed him still more by referring to school, and telling him how much he would enjoy it.

*Enjoy school!* Hugh could not bear the thought of it.

So, when Kathleen asked whether he would like to go for a short run with her in their motor-car after luncheon, he was glad of a good excuse, and hurried off to the woods as soon as the meal was over.

Only two of the explorers had arrived—Stella and Leslie, and they greeted him with open arms.

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“Poor old Donald has had to go down to the rectory with Aunt Nance,” Stella told Hugh. “He *was* sorry for himself. If he can, he is going to join us later on. We’ve brought tea, and we’re going to climb right over the Ridge. We thought that for a change we might be Wild West cowboys, searching for—well—what *do* cowboys search for?”

“Cows,” quoth Leslie slyly; and Hugh’s cross temper entirely melted in the laugh which followed. He was glad Stella and Leslie were quite friendly; evidently Donald had not told them of their morning quarrel, but—had Donald been secretly rather glad of an excuse not to join the party? He wondered.

Donald was still out of favour with Hugh, who flushed up to his eyes as that idea came into his head. There seemed to be every reason—or, shall we say, excuse?—for thinking it.

Why should he not take Stella and Leslie down into the Shingleton Caves? He had often gone there himself when, last year, his cousin Percy came to stay at the Court. Cousin Percy had known the history of the old smugglers, who had used the caves, from A to Z, and u gh had been immensely interested. It would



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be a great treat for Leslie, and Stella would love the adventure.

It would be a fine chance, too, since Donald was afraid of those caves not being safe!

There were other reasons, which Hugh did not tell himself so loudly. If Stella and Leslie visited the caves that afternoon it would certainly make Donald *very* sorry he had not joined them. He would think quite a lot, too, of Hugh's courage in going to a so-called dangerous place. And—best of all—Donald would be more likely to agree to his—Hugh's—suggestions in future, and he could imagine Donald coming to ask quite humbly to be taken to the caves.

Of course, at first mention of the word "caves" Leslie's excitement became intense.

"Have you really been down in them alone?" he asked. "Agnes has told me about them. I thought they were miles away. *Do* let us go. I've got my electric torch."

"It would be lovely," said Stella, giving a skip of glee; "but Donald will be awfully disappointed to be left behind. Shall we wait till to-morrow?"

"No," said Hugh; "I don't expect I shall

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be able to come out with you to-morrow. And there's no reason why we should not go to-day—and then again another day, if Donald wants to. Anyhow, I'm rather keen on going to the caves myself this afternoon, and you can do as you like about coming."

This was the final word, and Stella gave in at once. Leslie was hopping about like a parched pea in a bucket. *He* certainly would not wait till to-morrow, and Stella did not intend to be left to go home alone. She had quite forgotten there ever had been a chance of Leslie having a cold!

"Hurrah for caves!" cried Leslie, seizing Hugh by the arm; and Stella, determined not to be a spoil-sport, clapped her hands.

"We'll explore a *little* to-day," said she, "and a lot when Donald is with us. How far is it to Shingleton Caves, Hugh?"

"Two miles," said the latter, "taking all the short cuts. I know you'll love them. There's the place where Tom of the Red Poll fought three soldiers who had come to arrest him—his ghost is supposed to haunt the passage; and there is a well down which other smugglers are supposed to have lowered a fat

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old magistrate, saying they would leave him there to starve if he did not sign their pardons. You will love the caves, and we shall have a fine time."

"Why didn't you suggest going to them before?" asked Stella, as the three set off at the brisk pace which is only possible when one is going on a *very* nice expedition.

Hugh shrugged his shoulders.

"For one thing, I suppose I didn't think of them," he replied. "Another thing is, I can't take Ringo there, and—well, we've been having such fun at the Robin Hood game."

"Robin Hood hid in caves sometimes," asserted Leslie, "but oh, Hugh, just to think we may be going to see a ghost! Splen—dacious!"

Leslie's enthusiasm was catching, and Hugh felt quite important as he led the way across the rough, hilly tract of ground—half common, half waste—which stretched before them.

"You see that slope," Hugh said presently, "with the zigzag line of fir-trees growing right down to the foot? Well, the entrance to one of the outer caves is there. Then we have to crawl through ever such a tiny opening, which

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is half blocked by a rock, and along and along till we come to a little circular cave. There are about five big caves on a lower level, but we should want a rope to reach them, and we—I don't think we could quite manage it ourselves."

"Isn't it exciting?" laughed Stella. "Shall we have to go through the haunted passage?"

"If you like you can," said Hugh, "but there is no need. We shall soon see how we get on."

The big black clouds which had been low down on the horizon all day were creeping up over the sky, but the three children were far too excited to notice them. The cave entrance yawned black and mysterious, calling them to the great adventure. Quite forgetful of the last unlucky experience due to his rashness, Leslie raced over the ground, Hugh bringing up the rear of the party, the exultant thought in his mind: "How Donald will envy us!"

The sun was still shining when the explorers entered the outer cave, and for the first time Stella remembered the possibility of Leslie developing a cold.

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"It smells so damp here," she said fussily. "You might get a chill on the top of that swim of yours yesterday."

Leslie laughed scornfully, and vowed that he would not catch a cold or chill or any other ailment.

"Here's the passage," said Hugh, who was acting quite like a professional guide. "You'll have to squeeze yourselves up and crawl; it's the worst bit of the lot."

Stella was ready to agree that it was quite bad enough! She was terrified at the thought of putting her hand on a toad, and it was a real relief when she was able to stand up in the cave beyond.

Leslie was perfectly enchanted.

"You can almost *smell* smugglers," he said, sniffing deeply, as though smugglers must be very nice to smell indeed. Hugh was fairly in his element, pointing out various historic places where doughty champions of olden times had hidden or fought.

The story of Tom of the Red Poll was told with great zest, and Stella half reluctantly yielded to Leslie's pleading that they should go and walk along the haunted passage.

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“Have you actually heard of anyone ever seeing the ghost?” he asked Hugh, and was quite disappointed when the latter said “No.”

It was something of a shock to Leslie to find that he had not got his electric torch in his pocket after all. He fumbled and fussed, and was “absolutely certain” he had put it there.

“Someone must have taken it out,” he declared. “It’s too bad. Did you take it, Stella?”

Stella was quite positive, and a wee bit indignant.

“When we’re at home, mother and dad are always telling you that you lose things because you are so untidy,” she retorted with unusual vigour. “But never mind. Hugh has his torch.”

“This is the passage,” said Hugh. “I’ll come last, then the light will be thrown forward. There is supposed to have been another entrance beyond this passage, which the smugglers used when driving their mules and pack horses into the caves; only, many years ago there must have been a landslip, and the entrance was covered in. We shall have to



## THE SMUGGLERS' CAVES

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creep along a side passage, and so back to the big cave. It is a bit confusing."

It was not only confusing but rather creepy too. Stella was glad she was the one in the middle, with a boy in front of her and another behind. She could only see Leslie's back, so there was little fear of seeing Tom of the Red Poll.

In his heart of hearts, Leslie, too, was quite pleased not to see anything unusual, though he *said* what a pity it was!

They had reached the cross passages when Hugh, who had turned to look behind him, tripped on a piece of rock and fell headlong to the ground, while the electric torch, rolling away, must have slipped down some crack between wall and floor, for it disappeared.

"Oh!" gasped Stella; "the torch has gone out, and—have you hurt yourself, Hugh? Have——"

"No," replied Hugh ruefully, as he scrambled to his feet. "I haven't *hurt* myself, but—er—I've lost the torch, and—and I don't know how we are going to get out of the caves without a light!"

## CHAPTER XII

### IN SEARCH OF EXPLORERS

DONALD had not stopped one minute longer at the rectory than was absolutely necessary. He had not wanted to go at all, though he had taken care that Aunt Nance should not see his vexation. Aunt Nance was always so kind in letting them play their games without grumbling or fault-finding, that it would have been impossible to refuse to do something for her in return. But, once free from this duty, Donald lost no time. Away he raced, wondering how the others had got on, and if they would have finished up all cook's shortbread and ginger-nuts. He *could* have stayed to tea at the rectory, but that would have been a real penance. Drawing-room tea amongst grown-ups did not appeal to Donald.

Would Hugh have quite recovered from his grumps? he wondered. Of course he would! Sulks were not permitted in Robin Hood's

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band or amongst cowboys of the Wild West. Donald was chuckling to himself as he scrambled over the Ridge, thinking what a pity it was that they had not arranged for him to be one of the Mounted Police come in search of rustlers, as cattle thieves were called. Never mind!—a jolly good game was the great idea, and he would be extra chummy with Hugh, who *was* a sport, though he was a bit too “touchy” at times, due to the fact that he had had no brothers or sisters to play with.

“Hullo!—hullo!—Show up, my lads!” yelled Donald, as he stood on a knoll of the Ridge looking round for his comrades. “To me! To me! Coo—ee!”

But, to his disgust, no answer was returned. Were those cowboys hiding, ready to pounce on the new-comer?

Donald ran down the slope, still calling, then along the lower Ridge. His sharp eyes were watchful for any sign of the other three. They could not have gone home. It was too early; though, to be sure, Stella might have fussed about those gathering clouds. Before he had left the rectory, Aunt Nance had given him strict instructions that they must not go too far

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away from home, in case of the storm breaking. She was still worrying about Leslie and his cold.

“Coo-ee!” shouted Donald excitedly, as someone rose from behind a gorse bush. He thought it was Hugh, at first, then laughed at his own mistake as he recognized Foxey Bob. Down he swooped upon him.

“I’m looking for the others, Bob,” said he. “Have you seen them?”

Bob shook his head.

“Not for the last two hours,” he replied. “They were down in the woods, then—the three of them. They didn’t see me. ’Twas just as well!”

He spoke thickly, and Donald noticed how flushed his face was. Had Foxey Bob been drinking? Donald looked at his queer friend again. Bob was coughing, with his hand pressed to his side. Donald felt quite ashamed of his suspicion.

“You’re ill,” he said. “You look awfully bad. You ought to go to bed.”

Bob gave the strangest croak of a laugh.

“What?” he asked; “wi’ Sammy to nuss me? Nothin’ doing, lad! I’m all right. It’s

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a touch o' the chills, that's all about it—a touch o' the chills; but I'll be fine and right soon."

"I'd come and lend you a hand," said Donald, "that's to say, if Aunt Nance would let me. Aunt Nance would help, too. She's awfully kind, though rather too fussy if any-one's ill. She begins before you *are* ill. Are you going to bed?"

Bob shook his head.

"No," he replied, "Sammy and me's not thinkin' o' that. I'm going down to t' stream for a drink."

"I can't think where the others have gone," sighed Donald. "They were going to stay round by the Ridge till long after now."

Foxy Bob gave the boy a side glance.

"Well," he said slowly, "I can tell you about it, laddie. I was listenin' to the talk. It's the boy from t' Court put them up to it. Down into t' old smugglin' caves they've gone, and foolish they are, too. Them caves are no place for bairns. I would ha' warned them—but t' boy from t' Court was there. Let him go an' finish hisself, says I. He's

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his uncle's nevvv—*I've* heard him talk of Foxey Bob."

Poor Donald could hardly believe the news. He remembered Hugh's suggestion of the morning, though, and did not doubt Foxey Bob's words.

"Gone down into the Shingleton Caves?" he echoed. "Why, they aren't safe. Old Robbie said so, and they're miles from here. I—I've gone right out of my way, coming to the Ridge. It's too bad of Hugh. He's done it on purpose."

"Like as not," said Foxey Bob. "He's one of a bad stock. Let him go his own way. It's his concern."

"But Stella!" cried poor Donald, in terrible distress; "and Leslie! They've gone, too. Oh, Bob, we must go and find them. We simply must see that they are all right. You'll come with me, won't you? You'll know the quickest way."

Bob hesitated. He was really feeling very ill. Chill-proof as he had believed himself to be, he had managed to get an internal cold and did not feel at all inclined for a four mile tramp, for the Ridge lay in a direction exactly



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opposite to the caves. But very few people would ever have guessed what a liking Foxey Bob had for this sturdy youngster, who, quite frankly and without any sentiment, had championed him and made friends. Donald had had no idea of patronizing this lonely outcast for whom hardly anyone had a good word. He had liked Foxey Bob from the first—and had stuck to him in his own slow, steady fashion.

So now, though Bob hugged his arms in an effort to fight down those creepy chills, he agreed to take Donald by the shortest road to the caves. Not that Bob cared much what became of those other explorers. It was just for Donald.

And Donald was glad to have such a guide. He had forgotten all about gingerbread and shortcake as he tramped along by Bob's side.

A few heavy spots of rain were beginning to fall, and Bob shivered again. They had to call a halt, too, at Bob's hut, so that Sammy might be left there in safety. Sammy would not appreciate smugglers' caves!

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"There's going to be an awful storm," said Donald, as they started off again. "How black it is getting! Stella will hate it. It's too bad of Hugh."

He really felt angry with the latter, for he knew that Hugh had not been in a particularly nice frame of mind when he took Stella and Leslie off. Faster and faster fell the big drops of rain. Aunt Nance would be fairly *stewing* about Leslie's cold, Donald thought.

Then the thunder began to growl, and a long streak of lightning zigzagged from behind a black cloud.

"It's getting almost too dark to see our way," said Donald anxiously. "Oh, I do hope the others are still in the caves—or they might have gone home, after all. You are sure we are on the right road, Bob?"

Bob grunted. A fit of coughing had robbed him of breath for the moment.

The storm was gathering swiftly. Mighty clouds rolled up, the thunder pealed incessantly, the lightning was vivid. And faster, faster fell the rain. Bob's teeth were chat-

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tering quite loudly; he hardly seemed to be able to keep on his feet.

Donald felt—big boy though he was—that he would like to cry. Where *were* those foolish explorers?

At last—and it took such a long time before that “at last” came—Bob stretched out a shaking hand and pointed to that dark opening which Hugh had shown Stella and Leslie some hours previously.

No need for Donald to ask questions. That must be the passage leading to Shingleton Caves. It was not a bit like what Donald had expected, and he was rather glad. He had anticipated having to be lowered down some deep hole, or having to raise a rock disclosing a secret stair.

It was a comfort to think that, for a time at least, they would be out of the storm.

Anyhow, the inside of the caves could not be a great deal darker than it was here.

“Have you got a light, Bob?” asked Donald anxiously, as they stood in the shelter of that outer cave; “and—why, Bob—what *is* the matter? Are you ill?”

Bob did not reply; he had been leaning

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back against the rocky wall of the cave, and now, without warning, began to slip slowly to the ground. And as Donald, in sudden terror, bent over him, asking again and again what was the matter, Foxey Bob gave a deep-drawn sigh and rolled over—unconscious.

## CHAPTER XIII

### WHERE WAS DONALD ?

WHAT shall we do ?" asked Stella, clasping her hands very tightly, and determined that the boys should not have cause to remember that she was only a girl.

Hugh was still groping for his torch, but alas ! it could not be found.

"We shall have to go back the way we came," he said slowly. "It is lucky we hadn't gone into the other passage, where there are openings down to the lower caves."

Leslie tried to laugh.

"It's like a maze," he declared, "or a rabbit warren—full of burrows. Shall I go first again ?"

He did not *want* to lead at all, but, of course, all three were trying very hard indeed to remember what they had always intended to do if they ever had real adventures !

"No," said Hugh shortly, "I know the way best. Don't worry, Stella. As we—

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we've lost the light we had better go straight back ; when we come next time I'll bring a lantern. My cousin had a jolly one, and I'll get one like it in the town."

"Oh, yes, let's go straight out, please," urged Stella. "We've done a lovely lot of exploring, and Donald will wonder where we are !"

Hugh felt decidedly guilty. He knew that Stella, bravely though she tried to hide the fact, was very frightened, and he himself was decidedly doubtful as to the ease with which they would be able to get out from the caves.

There were so many passages, and everything was so pitchy dark !

Still, now was the time to prove his courage—the courage of which he had so often talked to Donald, as though it were a family heirloom.

"You had better take hold of my coat at the back," he told Stella, "and Leslie can hold your dress. Then we can't lose each other. Now—are you ready ?"

They were quite ready, and even Leslie took very good care not to say a word about wanting to see a ghost. For—this was the



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passage in which Tom of the Red Poll had fought his foes.

It is extraordinary how slowly one has to move in the dark ! Hugh had been sure he knew his way, but as he advanced, groping with his hands, he began to get horribly confused as to the direction they were taking.

“ Shall we get closer to the wall ? ” asked Leslie, and they managed to do so.

“ Here’s another passage ! ” called Hugh at last. “ I—er—I wonder—I suppose it *is* the one which leads into the big cave.”

“ There were other openings,” said Stella.

“ I think we’ve come too far,” decided Leslie.

“ We’d better try this one,” said Hugh—but he was beginning to feel desperate.

“ It’s follow my leader and blind man’s buff rolled into one,” chuckled Leslie. “ I say, Hugh, we ought to be in the cave by now. Are we ? ”

“ It doesn’t feel like a cave—it’s too stuffy,” said Stella.

“ It’s a passage,” Hugh muttered. “ I don’t—quite understand.”

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In his heart, though, he understood only too well—they had lost their way!

Hugh stuck to the trail with the desperate feeling that if they walked on long enough they must reach “somewhere.” But Stella’s next question was not comforting.

“Are we getting near the part where there are openings into the lower caves?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Hugh. “I—hope not.”

He felt Stella jerk at his coat.

“I believe we *are*,” she said, with a sob in her voice. “I feel—just as if we were going to walk over a precipice. Do—do, please, stand still, Hugh. Let us wait till someone comes to find us.”

Hugh obeyed. He was dreadfully sorry to think that his rather mean little plan to pay Donald out had ended in this. Here they were in a nice fix, even in danger, and it was entirely his own fault.

“I *wish* we hadn’t come,” he said, as he put his arm round Stella’s shoulder. “It was really rather horrid of me. Donald was right. He—er—generally is right. We—we quarrelled this morning, and afterwards, when I sug-

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gested coming here, he didn't agree. I thought he was funky."

Leslie gave a sniff.

"Donald's as plucky as a lion," he declared, "but as a matter of fact, Hugh, I'm just as much to blame as you. I asked Don once before about the caves, and he said we had better not go alone. I didn't stop to remind myself of that, though, because I wanted to come."

"I expect we were all to blame," said Stella, ruefully, "and we are very sorry for ourselves, now. Donald will understand when we tell him. Listen, boys, what is that noise? There—there can't be a waterfall anywhere, can there?"

All three listened breathlessly. The queerest rumbling came echoing down the passage, and at first not one of the listeners could imagine what it was.

It *might* be some subterranean waterfall, but Hugh felt sure that, if there had been one, he would have heard of it long ago.

"It sounds as if the smugglers were trundling their wagons of contraband," said Leslie.

"Only," added Hugh hastily, as he felt

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Stella shudder, "they didn't have wagons. They brought the goods on pack-mules from the coast."

"*I* know what it is," cried Stella suddenly. "It's thunder. Don't you remember the black clouds? And Agnes did say there was going to be a storm. Listen again."

The booming did not sound nearly so mysterious now that Stella had given it a name. They could hear the swelling and rumbling of the peals, as one succeeded the other.

"*What* a storm!" said Leslie.

"But it's going to help us!" cried Hugh excitedly. "Hurrah for the thunderstorm! Up you get, you two! Now, close together, and forward. If the peals sound louder as we go on along this passage, we shall know we are nearer the entrance. If they grow fainter we will turn and go back."

Leslie and Stella were only too ready to start.

"All the same, the thunder might be moving away quicker than we can move towards it," argued Leslie; but as he only argued under his breath, neither of the others heard!

And the thunder proved a splendid guide,

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sending them down one passage and along another, till Stella exclaimed aloud that she was sure they were in the smugglers' cave—the big one they had first explored.

“Just listen to the thunder!” she cried; “and, oh, *did* you see that blue flash? It must have been the reflection of the lightning.”

“I believe I can find my way now,” said Hugh. “See, here is that wide ledge which Leslie called the smugglers' sideboard. Keep close along the wall—follow my leader, and—oh!”

The “oh!” was a startled gasp as a zig-zag flash of lightning revealed the roof and flooring of that ancient cave.

“This is really what I call an adventure,” observed Leslie, recovering his spirits, “and I suppose it will end in a soaking. It's sure to be raining ducks and drakes.”

“If you two like to wait here—” began Hugh, but Stella promptly interrupted.

“We're going to keep together,” she said. “Now we've found the entrance I don't mind telling you both that I was fairly terrified, and I shan't feel quite happy till we are safe out of the storm.”

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“That’s right,” agreed Leslie; “and here’s the tunnel. However hard it’s raining, a wetting won’t be anything to worry about after that adventure. You first, Hugh? Right-oh! Stella next—then I’ll bring up the rear. I can imagine, now, exactly what it must have felt like to be a smuggler.”

The outer cave was very dark when the three children came creeping into it. The storm was at its height, and Stella would have liked to suggest remaining where they were till the worst was over. But Hugh had already turned up his coat collar and gone dashing off, calling out that they had better wait till he brought back help, or a conveyance.

As Stella and Leslie moved closer to the entrance to gaze after their chum, they passed quite close to where lay the shabby figure of Foxey Bob, half propped against the rocky wall, with Donald’s coat rolled up for a pillow. Donald himself had rushed off to get help. How strange it was! Little did the explorers of Shingleton Caves guess who lay there—and why he had come.

And it was Hugh who came running back



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first. He had just had a splendid bit of luck in hailing a motor-car in the road, and finding that it belonged to some friends of his uncle ; the chauffeur recognized him at once, and, being alone in the car, was only too ready to give the three children a lift home.

“ Poor Aunt Nance ! ” gasped Stella, as they all three raced at headlong speed from the cave entrance to the lane which wound along to the right ; “ she would want you to stay in bed for a week, Leslie, if—she—could see you now.”

Leslie only chuckled as he squeezed into the seat between the others, and Tims, the chauffeur, spread a mackintosh rug over their knees.

“ I believe,” he said, “ this is going to be the very best part of all.”

Hugh did not reply. He was wondering what he should say to his friends’ aunt—and to Donald. He hated the idea of telling Miss Garrock he was sorry, though he really felt it ; and as for what he would say to Donald, well——

But, to the surprise of the three children—for Hugh had asked Tims to leave him with

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the others at the Lodge—Donald had not returned, and Aunt Nance was in a greater state of worry over her three young visitors than Stella and Leslie had ever seen her. It was hateful to be told to go to bed at once—yes, actually to *bed*, though it was not much after six o'clock, and, now that the storm was over, the sun was shining brightly. Leslie went quite red in the face.

“Just as if you were a kid in disgrace,” he said, so indignantly that Agnes, who heard him, nearly laughed.

“My clothes are quite dry,” sighed Stella, “and, oh dear, I *do* wish we could have found Donald. He will have been caught in the storm, too. Poor old Don! And how worried he will be till he has found us!”

“He will have to come home before he finds you,” observed Hugh drily. He was feeling very awkward and uncomfortable about it all, knowing it was his fault that Stella and Leslie were in disgrace. But before he could say more, Miss Garrock herself came in to repeat her command that Stella and Leslie must go to bed instantly after having a hot bath.

There was no help for it! Aunt Nance

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looked so dreadfully worried that even Leslie could not rebel.

Hugh stood shy and awkward in the bay window while Aunt Nance told his comrades what they were to do. Hot baths, hot milk, and bed to-day,—and a lecture in the morning !

It did not sound at all a nice programme, and Hugh felt obliged to linger there till Miss Garrock returned after sending the others upstairs. Then he screwed up his courage and stepped up to the anxious lady.

It certainly did require courage, and Hugh had to think very hard about plucky ancestors before he could tell his story as it ought to be told.

He could have made plenty of excuses if he had liked, but he plodded on, trying to tell things as they really happened. And how mean and stupid the story sounded, now !

Still, he found Miss Garrock a much easier person to deal with than his uncle would have been, and he wound up with quite a gasp of self-accusation.

“ I know I’ve spoilt the whole afternoon,” he said, “ and—and perhaps Stella and Leslie

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will have awful colds. I can't tell you how sorry I am, Miss Garrock. The whole thing was my fault, you see; we should never have gone to the caves if I hadn't suggested it."

Miss Garrock looked at poor Hugh, standing disconsolately before her, and her kind face, instead of growing stern, became quite tender.

She laid her hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Stella has been telling me how plucky you were when you all lost your way in the caves, Hugh," said she, "but *I* think that the pluckiest thing you've done is to take the blame for running into danger like that. My dear boy, we all make mistakes and do wrong, but it isn't everybody that has the courage to admit it. I shall not say any more about this visit to the caves, though I had meant to write to your uncle and ask him to forbid your going there again. I am sure it won't be necessary. And now—I must be sending for Robbie and Roger. I want them to go and look for Donald. I hope no harm has come to him in that dreadful storm."

Hugh would have liked to hug the speaker. There was such a sympathetic note in her

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voice. She seemed to understand just how miserable he had been feeling, and instead of scolding and lecturing him, she had told him that she was going to trust him in the future.

Hugh felt as though a load had been taken from his shoulders. He kept repeating Miss Garrock's words to himself after she had hurried off to speak to her old gardener. She, Miss Garrock, knew there was no need to tell Uncle Leonard, because she could trust him to play the game in the future. Hugh felt that wild horses and the rack would not make him forfeit her confidence again.

Then, all at once, he remembered that Donald was still missing, and that Miss Garrock was terribly anxious about her nephew. And it was his, Hugh's, fault. There was, of course, only one thing now to be done—he must go and search for Donald, too. Afterwards, he would tell his chum what a—what an idiot he had been. He would even—make an effort to be nice to Foxey Bob, since Donald liked him.

It was fine again, now, though paths and roads were very muddy, with big pools of water standing about. Hugh set off at a

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brisk pace, wondering whether he should go straight to the Ridge. Donald *must* have taken shelter during the storm, and he would probably have called at one or two of the cottages nearest the Ridge itself. Or—should he ask Jenkins, the postman, whom he saw coming along, whether he had seen him?

Jenkins looked very muddy and wet in his oilskins, but he smiled and nodded in answer to Hugh's question.

Yes, he had seen the little gentleman from the Lodge going along the Heyford road, some hours ago—before the storm broke. He was walking with that good-for-naught Foxey Bob.

Hugh thanked the old man, and walked on. At first it annoyed him a good deal to think that Donald had not been searching for them very long, after all, but had gone off with that awful man. But it was odd that Jenkins should have seen them going along the *Heyford* road, in the opposite direction to the Ridge.

Hugh felt the hot colour coming to his face.

The Heyford road was the one which went



## WHERE WAS DONALD ?

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near the caves, and that morning he had suggested to Donald that they should go and explore them. Oh, how plain it had all suddenly become ! Donald had followed them to the caves and might have got lost in those bewildering passages just as he and the others had been.

Hugh caught his breath. He had been telling himself he would never want to go near those caves again, and yet, before an hour had passed, he was again hurrying in their direction.

And, yes ; he must go. For Donald might be there. Donald might be in some terrible danger—and it was all his fault !

## CHAPTER XIV

### FOXLEY BOB'S SECRET

THE storm had quite passed, and the last rays of the setting sun were peeping into the gloomy outer entrance of Shingleton Caves when Hugh reached the place. It was too dark to see anything at first, and he stood blinking, and wishing he had not been in quite such a hurry. It would have been wiser to have sought the help of a grown-up at one of the cottages he passed on the way.

Mat Farrell, a lame cobbler, lived with his deaf wife in a little cottage quite near. Mat would have come with him, and brought a proper lantern. Hugh had no light. He had meant to creep into the big cave and shout, and had hoped that he would hear Donald shouting in reply. Hark! there *was* a voice, speaking quite loudly, and near at hand, too.

Hugh's heart gave a big thump as the tones of that harsh voice broke the silence.

"He brought it on himself, Luce," said

## FOXLEY BOB'S SECRET

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the voice. "He hadn't any pity—sending me to prison for trapping a rabbit or so—and—letting my Annie die, turning her out o' the home. So he lost his son. Serve you right, Sir Leonard! Yes, serve you right! No—it wasn't my doing, though I—I——"

Hugh closed his eyes; then slowly opened them.

Had he been dreaming?

Of course, he knew all about his uncle's lost heir. But—he never thought much about it. It was so very long ago, and no one talked of it at the Court.

Who was speaking of it, out loud, in Shingleton Caves? Was it a ghost?

His eyes were becoming used to the gloom, now. He could see the cave walls and, yes, there on the floor, half hidden by a buttress of rock, were two figures outstretched as though sleeping. Hugh was trembling from head to foot as he crept quite close and peered down. One of the forms was Donald, fast asleep, curled half round like a dormouse. The other was Foxley Bob. Donald must have been *very* sound asleep, for he did not seem the least disturbed by the talker. Foxley

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Bob was tossing about restlessly now, half sitting up, then falling wearily back.

Hugh did not know a great deal about illness, but he had once visited a cottage where a boy was delirious. He guessed Foxey Bob must be delirious. The man's face was dusky red under its tan. His eyes were wide open and fever-bright. He spoke in hoarse, croaking tones. As Hugh bent over him, he raised himself again to a sitting posture and gripped Hugh's hand, though he did not seem to recognize or even see him. But he began to talk again, as though he knew that someone else was at his side—someone he called Luce.

"Sir Leonard lost his son, Luce," he repeated, "same as I lost my Annie. Only the boy didn't die. That I swear, same as I swear it wasn't my doing. It was young Mark did it—because of Annie. *My* Annie. He was her brother and twin, but he didn't love her like I did. Only—I was in prison; that was how it was. But Mark told me—before he died. Sir Leonard might ha' known, too, if he hadn't killed my Annie—turned her out, sick and ill. *My* Annie. Yes, it was

Mark's revenge, see that?—and I let it be. The boy's alive, too—Luce—but that's not my business. Sir Leonard, he treats me like a beast, to be trapped and prisoned. That's his wish. Trapped and prisoned. So *beasts* tell no secrets—though afterwards—they told me afterwards—it wasn't his fault about Annie. He knew nothing of her, and the cottage. He might have had his son—if he'd treated me—as a man, not a beast.”

Then, all at once, Foxey Bob dropped back, muttering about Sammy, and a drink of water—a regular jumble of words without much sense in them.

Hugh did not move. He felt as if someone had bewitched him, turning him into a plaster figure. Of course, Foxey Bob was ill—delirious; he had not known what he was talking about. No, he had not known. It—was all nonsense, and——

“Hello!” said a quite different voice.

Hugh had moved his foot, and touched that sound sleeper close by. Donald sat up with a startled exclamation.

“Hello!” he gasped; “where am I? What's happened? *Hugh!*”

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Hugh made a big effort and pulled himself together.

"Yes," he said, and was surprised to find that his own voice sounded quite hoarse. "It's Hugh. I am Hugh. I have come to find you. You are in Shingleton Caves."

Donald sat up, rubbing his eyes vigorously.

"But I—we—Foxey Bob and I came to find *you*," he protested. "Where are Stella and Leslie? And the thunderstorm!"

Poor old Donald! He could not quite wake up all at once!

"Stella and Leslie are at home at Clinton Lodge," explained Hugh. "They are quite safe. It was all my fault, and I've told Miss Garrock how sorry I am. She is awfully anxious about you, Donald; that's why I came to find you. And—I think Foxey Bob is ill."

Donald was wide awake now. He turned and saw the figure lying there beside him in the shadows.

"How *could* I forget?" he cried, in self-reproach. "Of course, I remember all right now. Foxey Bob heard you say you were going to the caves. He came with me, and



he was awfully ill. He fainted, and I tried to get help, but I couldn't; and—and the thunderstorm was awful. Old Mat, the cobbler, was too lame to help, but he said I might bring Bob along to his place. But when I got back here Bob was asleep, and I couldn't wake him. Then—well, I sat down, just to wait till the storm passed; and I got drowsy. I remember feeling myself dropping off, so I got up again. I didn't want to go to sleep. I didn't think I *could*, when you were all lost. I meant to fetch help when the rain had stopped a bit, and—oh, I must have gone to sleep after all. You're *sure* Leslie and Stella *are* safe?"

"Quite safe, at home," repeated Hugh, "but Bob does seem ill. He—he has been quite——"

He paused, hesitating.

Donald was leaning anxiously over his friend.

"Poor old Bob," he said. "Is he very ill, do you think?"

"I—don't—know," replied Hugh. He was feeling as if everything were a dream. Of course, what Bob had said just now could not

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have been true. But somehow he could not think of anything else. It seemed to Hugh as if someone had dealt him a blow, stunning, or half stunning, his mind.

Donald was not thinking of Hugh at this moment, nor even of Aunt Nance. He was bending over his friend Foxey Bob.

Poor Bob was opening his eyes very wearily, but the fever-light had gone from them for a time. He was just tired—tired out—and would have given a great deal to be left alone where he was.

But Donald wanted to make haste and get him away to a warm bed. Old Mat had said that he had known Foxey Bob in better days, and his deaf wife had nodded when Donald suggested taking the sick man to their cottage. Donald had promised, too—rather rashly—that Aunt Nance would pay for everything. Donald felt certain about this, because Aunt Nance's sole business in life seemed to be to fuss after sick people, and take them delicacies of one sort or another.

It was a long and strenuous task to get Foxey Bob as far as Fir Cottage. He did his best to walk straight, and kept repeating that

he was not ill ; but he could not help “ wobbling,” and groaning, too, when his cough racked him. He did not seem to realize that it was Hugh, the nephew of the hated Sir Leonard, who was helping him along, as well as Donald. And Hugh did his part manfully. He had resolved that, come what might, he would never again express his dislike of Foxey Bob in Donald’s hearing, and now, when he saw Donald’s smile of pleasure and heard his few words of thanks, he felt amply repaid.

As for Donald, Hugh was behaving like a chum, he thought, and he was only too glad to meet the other half-way. In fact, he had never liked Hugh so well as he did now, when he saw him helping Foxey Bob along the water-logged lane as carefully as though he had been his closest friend.

Mat’s deaf wife looked rather horror-stricken at sight of her muddy, shabby patient, but Donald never dreamed of refusal. He helped poor Bob into the cosy kitchen, and when Bessie Farrell saw how Bob sank down, helpless and half swooning, on a chair, she seemed to forget all about his grubbiness and shabbi-

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ness, and called to her husband to come and help her as best he could. They must get the poor fellow to bed, and it was "just a bit of luck that Harry's bed was made up, and him not coming after all."

Foxy Bob tried to protest that he was right enough, and ought to be going home; but these kind folk would not listen. As for the boys, it was Hugh who brought a look of relief to Donald's anxious face.

"I'll telephone for the doctor to come here at once, as soon as I get back to the Court," he promised, adding, as he looked at Donald, "and we ought to get back as soon as possible—your aunt is worried about you."

"Come along, then," said Donald. "The sooner we get back, the sooner the doctor will be here, and it's good to think that Foxy Bob is going to be taken care of decently."

Then, after thanking the cobbler and his wife, and being told that Bob should have a nice bed and proper nursing, Donald took Hugh's arm and off the boys ran.

Hugh was pleased he had made one effort, at least, to keep his resolve. He knew that Donald and he were nearer friendship this

## FOXLEY BOB'S SECRET

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evening than they had ever been before. As for that other thought, of—of what Foxley Bob had said in the cave—he must forget all about it. It could not be true. It could *not* be true that Uncle Leonard's own boy was still alive; for, if it were, what about himself?—he who, for years and years, had learned to look upon the dear old Court as the home which would one day belong to him.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE BIGGEST ADVENTURE OF ALL

**A**FTER a busy day, with lots of exciting happenings, it is not always easy to cuddle down in bed and go right off to sleep. Hugh, when he got into bed that night, pulled the bed-clothes right up over his ears, and buried his face deep down in the pillow, just as if he were afraid of some little whispering elf perched at his ear and reminding him of something he did not want to remember.

If only he could go to sleep, by to-morrow morning he would probably forget about Foxey Bob's delirious chatter. For when people are delirious, surely it is only nonsense that they talk. Hugh recalled how Willie Eames had said that cocks and hens were walking along the mantelshelf, and hopping down on to his bed. *That* was nonsense, just as Bob's talk of Hugh's cousin Keith had been nonsense.



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Hugh edged deeper down into his bed and tried not to think any more. But it was no use; for something seemed to be persistently telling him that Foxey Bob had not been talking nonsense at all. He had been talking of something that had really happened.

Hugh got up, and sat on the edge of his bed. He was going to argue down that tiresome thought. Foxey Bob had talked of a man called Mark. Hugh knew whom he meant, for he had heard a good deal of Foxey Bob's story from the Court gardener; how Bob had married Annie Gibbons, whose twin brother, Mark, was one of his bosom friends. Both Mark and Foxey were poachers, and they had once been surprised by the keepers while poaching in the Court woods. Mark escaped, but Foxey had been sent to gaol for two months. While he was in prison his young wife and her baby had been turned out of their cottage by a cruel bailiff of Sir Leonard's—during Sir Leonard's absence abroad—and the bailiff had said it was by his master's order. Foxey Bob's wife and baby had died, and a week or so later—before Foxey was out of prison—Sir Leonard's heir

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had disappeared. Hugh went over the whole story to himself, now, and put Foxey's delirious ravings alongside it.

No one had ever heard again of the man Mark Gibbons, after that poaching business. He was supposed to have gone abroad. Hugh clenched his hands very tightly. Supposing Foxey Bob *did* know where Uncle Len's son was! If Hugh told what he had overheard, and if Keith were found, Keith would be heir to the Court; it would be his rightful home, and what would happen to him, Hugh, then?

It did not seem possible to answer that question. He dared not look such a possibility in the face. If Uncle Len's boy came home, Hugh would no longer be the heir to Trefford Court.

And Keith was alive! Hugh was sure of it. Yes, he was getting more and more sure of it.

This was Foxey's revenge; the way he had allowed his hatred to be satisfied. How terrible for Uncle Leonard!

Hugh jumped off the bed, and began to walk up and down the room. What would it mean to Uncle Len if his boy were found?

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Hugh clenched his hands hard, and tried to whistle—but he couldn't. He was thinking of Uncle Len, who had so worshipped the little dark-eyed lad whose portrait hung in his study—such a beautiful, mischievous little fellow, clutching at the head of a big St. Bernard dog. Sir Leonard had never been the same man since his son had disappeared. Even if it was using a foolish expression to talk of “broken hearts,” it was very nearly a true one in this case—so Hugh had often heard.

It would be splendid for Uncle Len if Keith were found. But—not splendid for Hugh, since in that case he would no longer be heir.

He would no longer be “young master.” He would no longer be the most important person in the house after his uncle. He would no longer have *his* pony, *his* rabbits, *his* aviary, *his* dogs. Keith would take his place. Quite possibly Hugh would be sent away to school, and only come occasionally to the Court, as a visitor.

And, if Hugh said nothing, it was quite unlikely Sir Leonard would ever know that his son was alive.

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Foxy Bob seemed to be the only one in the secret; and Foxy Bob was very ill. If Foxy died—no one would know, and Hugh alone would hold the secret.

It would be so easy to say nothing, and yet—. Hugh's bedroom suddenly seemed to stifle him. Slipping on his dressing-gown, he crept away to the picture gallery, where his beloved ancestors looked down on him from the walls. What an argument he and Donald had had about courage! Hugh recalled it all, now. How sturdily Donald had stuck to his guns, maintaining that there was a much truer sort of courage than that required for duels—or any other sort of fighting.

Hugh knew what Donald had meant. Just that sort of fighting was before him now, and he did not like it. To hit out with one's fists, even to fight with a sword, was thrilling and heartening. But to fight down that little buzzing imp of temptation was another, and harder, matter.

Hugh was thinking it all over again now, in the over-and-over-again way we all know so well. He was thinking what it would feel like to be no longer Hugh Trefford, heir to

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the Court ; thinking of all he would have to give up.

Then he was thinking of the other boy, and how he, Hugh, would be a kind of thief if he remained silent. Not only a thief, but a brute—a mean little wretch !

And how kind Uncle Len had always been to him ! He had given him such happy times, so many pleasures ; always he had been good and generous. How *dared* he be so treacherous as to think of rewarding him by keeping back this secret ?

Uncle Len would be very happy if Keith were found ; and if Hugh found him, Uncle Len would be happier still. He would be proud to call Hugh a true Trefford.

The boy walked slowly back down the long gallery, his head raised once more. For he had made his decision—he was going to do his best to bring Cousin Keith back to the Court, even if he had to give up everything to him.

Hugh was smiling as he climbed back into bed ; but he was not thinking now of what Uncle Len would say, or what his ancestors would think of their descendant ; he was

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smiling as he pictured Donald's slow grin of approval, and how Donald's hand would grip his own. Only—he would never dare tell Donald he had even thought for a moment of *not* saying any more about Foxey Bob's delirious ravings.

Hugh did not go off at once the next morning to break the news to his uncle.

“Foxey Bob would never tell *him* the truth,” thought Hugh, “but he might tell Donald. I shall speak to Donald first, as a great secret, and then we will consider what is the best thing to do.”

Hugh felt a quiver of excitement as he told himself this, for he could not help thinking how splendid an adventure it might be if he and Donald could bring Cousin Keith home to the Court, without anyone else having a hand in it.

Now that Hugh had fought that stubborn battle, he wanted to make the most of the victory; and as he unlocked his desk, he certainly was *not* thinking of having to give up everything to an unknown cousin.

Hugh had a secret drawer in his desk, and inside lay five one-pound notes. He had



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saved that money to buy a new saddle for Sinbad—but never mind. He was going to put it all in his pocket, now, to take on this new adventure. He had an idea that, in such cases as this, money might prove useful.

At breakfast Uncle Leonard passed a remark about Hugh's cheery face.

"You don't look any the worse for being out in the thunder-storm, Hugh," he said. "I hope your friends have escaped, too." Then, as Hugh was leaving the room, Sir Leonard laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I am glad to see you looking so bright and happy, boy," he added. "I ought to have understood long ago that I was too dull a companion for a young fellow like you."

Hugh laughed. He really felt quite excited about his secret schemes, and—if Uncle Leonard only knew!

Donald was just coming out of the Lodge gate when Hugh met him. He beamed at Hugh—just as he had beamed last evening. He had not forgotten that stride towards a still greater friendship.

"Stella and Leslie won't be able to come out to-day," he said, "they have a tickle in

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their throats. I don't think they mind, though, for Eliza is going to let them make a plum pudding for dinner, and to-morrow we are all going to a circus."

Hugh was sorry to hear that Stella and Leslie were not well, and that tickle in their throats gave him a special fellow-feeling for them. He had a big lump of excitement in *his* throat, and as he was swallowing it down preparatory to telling his story, Donald showed him the sharp little face of Sammy, the fox, under his jacket.

"Aunt Nance says I'm like the Roman boy who cuddled a fox till it bit his chest off," he said; "but Sammy won't bite *me*! I'm going to take him to Bob. The doctor came in for a minute to see Aunt Nance about him, and he says he's much better."

Hugh cleared his throat. "I'm coming too," he said. "And, Donald, I have a tremendous secret to tell you. Shall we go round by the camp first, and I'll get it off my chest?"

Donald grinned. He thought it rather decent of Hugh to want to come and see Bob, and he agreed at once.

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But he never expected to hear *such* a secret. Hugh poured out his story in a regular gabble, too fast for Donald to take it all in with one telling. He had to have it repeated. Then he sat down on a tree-stump and stared at Hugh.

"How thrilling!" he said. "It's like a fairy tale, or a story out of a book. Is it true?"

"Yes," said Hugh rather loudly, as though he wanted to convince himself, "of course it's true. But we've got to find out ever such a lot more; that's why I'm coming to see Bob, too. And I want you to ask him all about it!"

Donald flushed a little.

"All right," he said, "I'll ask him. Foxey must have felt pretty awful, having a secret like that on his mind."

"Do you think I had better come in the room with you?" said Hugh feverishly; "he doesn't like me, you know. What shall we do? It's—it's such a responsibility. But if only Foxey will tell you, Donald, we might be able to find Keith without anyone's help. That's what I should like."

"So should I," said Donald, his grey eyes

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sparkling, "and if you don't mind, Hugh, I think you are quite right about letting me ask Bob without anyone else being there. You see—he's friendly with me; and I really think he's more likely to confide in me than in anyone else at all."

So, when the boys reached the little thatched cottage, it was Donald who went in alone to discover the secret which Sir Leonard Trefford would have given his fortune to learn. Hugh waited outside, in a little copse of silver birch-trees. It was a clear bright morning after the storm, and the sun was shining on the drops of water hanging from the pretty, whitish-green leaves. Birds were singing; the whole countryside was filled with the happiness of springtime.

Hugh stood bareheaded, his pulses throbbing with keen expectation. What was going on in the cobbler's little bedroom? Foxey Bob had kept his terrible secret for so many long years; would he yield it up now to a boy who, after all, had been his friend for only a few weeks?

No, Hugh was certainly not thinking of himself to-day, or of all he might be losing.

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*His* horse, *his* pony, *his* pets, *his* wealth, were forgotten, as he thought of the great achievement which Donald and he were attempting, and which would bring happiness in its train.

And what would Cousin Keith say to it all? What would he be like? It was difficult to picture that black-eyed little fellow, hugging a dog almost the size of himself, grown into a boy as tall as Donald.

A long, long time it seemed before Donald came out of Mat's cottage. Hugh had time to think over all this great adventure from beginning to end, and then over again. He had time to picture Keith coming to the Court and taking his place; he had time to picture Uncle Len's happiness; but he would not allow himself time for regrets.

*"Never want a thing back again when you have once given it,"* was a lesson Hugh had long ago been taught. Having once given up his desire to keep what he held at all costs, Hugh had no thought of doing it grudgingly.

And Donald's faith in him was such that he had never questioned that Hugh could have acted in any other way.

At last Donald appeared at the cottage

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door. Hugh had never seen him look so white or so upset. He might almost have been crying, and though he waved his hand he seemed to be thinking of something else. He came to Hugh and sat down beside him on a fallen beech-tree.

"Yes," he said slowly, as though Hugh had asked a question, "Foxey Bob has told me everything. I think he is very sorry for it all—and we'll go on being friends."

"And is Keith——" began Hugh breathlessly. Donald shook himself. "It still doesn't seem true," he said, "but it *is* true. It's a wonderful story. And, Hugh, we'd better go now—you and I—to fetch Keith back. Only I was thinking of Aunt Nance. How can we let her know we shan't be home till this evening?"

"We could telephone to the Court," said Hugh, "and ask someone to take a message to her. She will understand afterwards. But, Donald, you *are* telling things upside-down. Tell me all about everything from the first."

Donald rubbed his chin very hard.

"At the beginning," he said, "I saw Mat. He was quite nice, and said his wife was looking after Bob. I didn't see her because she



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was in the kitchen. So I went up and found Bob awake. He looked very clean and—different. He was awfully pleased to see Sammy, and he talked of how good Mat and Bessie had been, and how he'd never expected such kindness. He said it all came from having me for a friend, but I told him that was nonsense. Still, he was rather sad and very grateful; his illness seems to have changed him a bit. Then I began to talk. He was quite upset at first, but after a while he began to come round.

“He said he knew he'd behaved awfully badly. He and Mark had been wild and foolish, he said, and too ready to listen to black talk against Sir Leonard. And at last, when he came out of prison and found his wife dead, he was quite like a madman; he was *glad* to hear Sir Leonard's son was missing. Later on, Mark came and told him about it. Mark was so angry at Bob's going to prison, and mad with grief about his twin sister's death, that he plotted to steal Keith. He took the kiddie to a cottage where his old aunt lived, about twenty miles away, outside a small village.

“The old aunt kept Keith, though Mark wanted to take him abroad with him when

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he went. Anyway, Mark went abroad alone, and died there. Foxey Bob knew where Keith was, but he did not go near the place for years. Then he found that the aunt was dead, and that Keith lived with her daughter, who was married and had three children of her own. They don't know that Keith was stolen. Foxey Bob went to see them one day, and said he was Keith's uncle. Mrs. Grinnack—that's her name—showed him the box of clothes and things which her mother said had belonged to Keith. She believed that Keith was the son of a sailor supposed to be drowned, but who might, perhaps, turn up one day. That's all. Foxey Bob often thought of going abroad and taking Keith, but he could never quite make up his mind. He has given me the address of this Grinnack woman, where Keith is, and a message. He says she might ask for money."

Hugh had never said one word during all that story.

Now he stood up.

"We must go and bring Keith home," said he. And his voice rang clear, as though he were glad about something.

## CHAPTER XVI

### FOUND AT LAST

“IT’S a long two miles from the station,” said Donald stolidly. He and Hugh had sent their telephone message and set out straight away. It must have been a lucky expedition, too, for they had caught their train to Arlesthorne at once.

Now it was past one o’clock, as they climbed the last hill.

“The cottage to the right, with two poplars in front of it,” said Hugh breathlessly. He never could have explained how he felt. Perhaps it was the way explorers feel, standing on the verge of undiscovered countries.

Yes, there was the cottage with the poplars, and there, just about to go in by the front door, was a woman carrying a loaf of bread. She looked a thin, worried person, and when she saw Donald and Hugh she just walked inside, turned round, and slammed the door.

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That was not very encouraging, but Donald had soon grasped the knocker, and was beating a rat-a-tat on the panels. It was not the woman who answered, but a boy with a ferrety face and red hair. He, certainly, was *not* Keith Trefford. It was Hugh who took the lead now.

“I want to see your mother,” he said quietly. “I have a message for her. Please let us come in.”

The boy looked as if he meant to say “No,” but Donald held out a shilling.

“We won’t be long,” he said slowly.

Then the boy went away. Hugh looked at Donald and nodded. Yes—they had better go in. They followed the boy into a very muddled, dirty kitchen, and could hear the woman talking to someone in the room beyond. But Hugh did not take much notice of the woman or the inner room. He was staring at another boy who sat in the window-seat, peeling a stick. He was *very* shabby, wearing a ragged jersey and worn-out shoes, but he had the face of the little dark boy, hugging the big St. Bernard, whose picture hung in Sir Leonard’s library.

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Yes, that was undoubtedly Keith Trefford, heir to Trefford Court; the boy who was going to take his place. And for eight years he must have been living like the poorest of little village lads, often hungry, often harshly treated, and often sad.

Hugh went across the kitchen and held out his hand.

"You are my cousin Keith," he said; "I've come to take you home."

The boy stared, and a little tousle-headed girl standing by cried out: "That ain't yer cousin. It's Tom."

Hugh looked round for Donald, but Donald had gone to speak to the woman. He looked at Keith again.

"You *are* my cousin," he said; "it is true. You will come with us? You—you will have a lovely home—and a pony to ride."

Keith's dark eyes began to sparkle.

"Get on!" he urged. "You're gassin'."

"He's tellin' lies," added the girl.

Hugh reddened, but just then the woman clattered hurriedly into the kitchen. She seemed angry.

Off you go, you young imperences,"

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she stormed; "don't you tell me! *I'll* not listen to your nonsense. Stolen, indeed! Sir Leonards and Courts, indeed! Why, Tom's just an orphan lad whose dad was lost at sea. Off you go—both of you! A nice temper my Harry would be in, telling the boy to go jus' as he's gettin' useful. Now then——"

Donald looked very hot and bothered. He had tried to give Foxey Bob's message and tell his tale, but the woman only shouted at him.

It was Hugh who had the great idea this time. Fumbling in his pocket, he brought out that little roll of one-pound notes.

"I will give you these," he said very politely, "if you will let us take Keith, and give us the box of clothes he had when he first came to your aunt."

The woman hesitated. But—she was poor, with rent owing, and she had a drunken husband. That roll of notes decided her.

"It won't be a case of police?" she asked cautiously.

Hugh shook his head.

"I promise it will not" he said, "and you



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will get more money if you'll let Keith—I mean Tom—come."

That decided it, and the woman bustled away to fetch the precious box, while Keith, highly excited, threw away his stick and jumped off the window-seat.

"Come along," he urged, "before father gets back. It'll be all up if *he* comes!"

That was warning enough! Donald took the box, and Hugh took possession of Keith; then—off they hurried, followed down the hill by the girl and boy, who seemed bent on making "Tom," as they called him, come back. "Tom" did not share their wish. He was beginning to get excited.

"There he comes," he muttered, pointing down the lane to where a working man was staggering along, bag on back, but evidently fresh from a visit to the village inn.

Keith did not seem anxious to meet this individual, and took a flying leap over a ditch, diving through a hole in the hedge.

"This way!" he cried. "Short cut to sta—ation. Run! If he catches me he won't let me go—not he!"

And Donald, roused for once from his

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slow ways, followed hard on the heels of Hugh and his cousin, before the man in the lane had time to raise a shout or follow in pursuit.

It was a race which *must* be won—by rescuers and rescued.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A VICTORIOUS HOMECOMING

“**S**ERVE Donald right,” said Leslie grimly, as he passed up his plate for a second helping of pudding. “He loves plum pudding—and this is ripping. Don’t you think so, Aunt Nance?”

Aunt Nance smiled. She was beginning to wish, poor dear! that she had not been so ready to invite her nephews and niece to spend those Easter holidays with her. The message sent down so coolly from the Court, that Donald could not be home till evening, had quite vexed her. And she had trusted Donald—slow, steady Donald, who had seemed to be one of those boys you were sure of finding where they ought to be found. She had decided that she would have to talk very plainly to her elder nephew when he returned.

In the meantime, she had certainly risked indigestion by eating the plum pudding which her nephew and niece had so triumphantly

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concocted that morning. Eliza *ought* to have added a choice of tapioca. At the same time, how could she have eaten tapioca when two smiling and confident cooks awaited her opinion of that topping pudding?

"I do trust Donald will be home before tea-time," said poor Miss Garrock, laying down her spoon after her heroic effort. "I cannot imagine where he and Hugh can have gone. It is not right of him."

Leslie and Stella exchanged glances. If Aunt Nance were getting really cross it would be quite a new experience.

"Let's read our books in the den," suggested Stella after dinner, "and get Agnes to tell some tales, when she's not too busy. Perhaps she will look us out those old bits of curtain for the camp."

Agnes was very obliging. She and Eliza were quite agreed that, in spite of all the extra work, they would be very sorry to say good-bye to the young visitors. Leslie, for one, had fairly stolen their hearts, and both Donald and Stella had found their own special niches in the household.

So, when tea-time came and no Donald

## A VICTORIOUS HOMECOMING

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appeared, Agnes was quite sympathetic with Stella and Leslie, who were afraid that Aunt Nance would be very annoyed.

“Miss Garrock has Mrs. Dillon in the drawing-room,” she said, “so she’ll be having tea in there, and likely as not will forget about Master Don——”

That was as far as Agnes got; for, from the gravel sweep outside came the sound of a cheer—and lo! there was Donald, muddy, smiling, triumphant, as if he were a hero instead of a truant.

Stella and Leslie made a rush for the door, and flung it open.

“Hullo, Robin Hood!” cried Leslie. “Marry come up——”

Leslie was always saying “marry come up,” which he persisted in calling “old English.” But Donald was far too excited to play Robin Hood.

“Hugh—Hugh——” he stammered. “It’s true! Hugh and I—but mostly Hugh—have found Sir Leonard’s son. He—he has taken him back to the Court. Oh, Agnes, give me a glass of water, or my throat will crack.”

It was Stella who dashed off for the water. Agnes was much too excited, and had gone

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rushing away to call Aunt Nance, who, followed by Mrs. Dillon, came hastening to hear the news. Donald was drinking water in great gulps, and gasping out a story about Foxey Bob—old Mat—a railway journey—and Keith, who, until a few hours ago, had been Tom the nameless.

Even Aunt Nance got too excited to call for order, and—oh dear! would Donald ever be able to answer all those questions being hurled at his head?

However, we must leave Donald to that difficult task and hurry back to the Court, where Hugh was going in search of his uncle, to break the amazing news.

“You stay outside the door,” he told Keith, who was still thinking that this must be a kind of dreamy joke from which he would soon awaken, although dim, very dim memories were already coming back and bewildering him.

He remembered seeing that deer’s head hanging on the wall over there. Someone, very tall, had lifted him high up to pat it. And—there had been a cat, called Minnie, which used to wait for him—on that wide window-sill. And——



## A VICTORIOUS HOMECOMING

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But while Keith was trying hard to bring back little bits of baby-memory, Hugh was standing by Uncle Leonard. And if you searched England through, you would not have found a prouder boy than Hugh Trefford at that moment.

For he had fought his battle—and won! He had played the game, as Donald would have played it.

At first Sir Leonard listened impatiently to a story of which he could not quite understand the drift. Then—a word, and his attention was claimed; a few more words and he was on his feet.

“Not Keith!” he cried. “Hugh—it is impossible. Not Keith!”

But the boy outside, hearing that name spoken in a vaguely remembered voice, had run into the room, pausing quite unintentionally under the portrait of himself taken eight long years ago.

It was the finest confirmation his father could have had; and with a cry, choked by emotion, of “My boy! My little son Keith!” Sir Leonard had sprung forward, and once more the father held his son in his arms.

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Hugh would have stolen away, tears in his eyes and triumph in his heart, but Keith stopped him.

“It was Hugh who found me,” he cried; “Hugh, who says he’s my cousin. It—it’s fine—and Hugh——”

But Sir Leonard’s look as he drew Hugh, too, towards him, was already reward and assurance enough that, though he had lost his heirship, Hugh had won a love which had never seemed quite to reach him before.

“Heaven bless you, lad, for a true Trefford,” said Sir Leonard.

It was the greatest moment of Hugh’s life.

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The Easter holidays had come to an end. It was time for the three young Garrocks to say farewell to Aunt Nance and a whole host of new friends.

And while Leslie haunted the garden and the kitchen, where he was telling Eliza for the hundredth time that he fully intended to have the fattest wife and fattest cook he could find when he grew up, Donald had started early for Fir Cottage, where Foxey Bob was growing strong again after his illness.

## A VICTORIOUS HOMECOMING

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It was only yesterday that Sir Leonard had been to see Bob, and though no one else had been present at the interview, everyone in the village would soon know that the old poacher was going to give up his hut on the waste land, and have a place as under-keeper in the Court woods, in the employ of Sir Leonard.

How delighted Donald was with the news and how gaily he whistled as he tramped back to join Stella and Leslie, who had gone to say good-bye to Sir Leonard at the Court! Since Hugh and Keith would be seeing them off at the station to-morrow, it was too early yet to say good-bye to them.

But Hugh was waiting to have a few words with Donald, now, apart from the rest. He did not look at all like a boy who had lost his inheritance, for never had Hugh's face been so happy. He wrung Donald's hand, too, as if he meant to shake it off.

"I don't mind so much now about going to school," he said. "Keith and I are going together. I say, Donald, wouldn't it be grand if we could go to your school! That *would* be sport! I shall ask Uncle Len. He's such a jolly good sort—I believe he'll say

## THREE AND ONE OVER

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‘yes.’ He wants us all to be friends. And going to school will make holidays all the finer, won’t it? That reminds me, I’ve got some grand news; only let’s wait for the others. Here they come!”

Keith came up first and put his hand on Hugh’s sleeve. He was already the best of friends with his cousin.

Hugh smiled round at the three good comrades of a never-to-be-forgotten holiday.

“Keith and I are going on with the Robin Hood camp,” said he, “and—this is the news. Uncle Len is asking your parents to let you spend your summer holidays at the Court. You will come, won’t you?”

There was a slight pause—then Leslie snatched off his cap.

“Hurrah for the holidays!” he sang.

Donald, the slow, smiled too.

“And hurrah for Hugh Trefford and his cousin Keith!” he added.

I think Sir Leonard in his library at the Court must have heard the echo of those cheers.











